

The Hunt

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Summary: Chizuru has to find her father. It will be hard, but thankfully for her past training, she can do it. Now with the help of the Shinsengumi, Chizuru will truly find out the meaning of hardship, betrayal, and love. (Took a different route with Chizuru here. Wanted to make her stronger) *First story ever*

1. Chapter 1

Chapter One

How had she gotten herself here again? This always seems to happen. One minute she is minding her own business, the next she's handing someone's butt to them. She had only been trying to find an inn when they had shown up. She blamed her size; her size had always been a problem. When you're small, people assume you are weak, and to the weak-minded, weak means easy target. That was why she was here now, hiding behind wooden crates crouched in the snow TRYING to avoid confrontation. She sighed softly. This was NOT going as planned. It was not that Chizuru was one to run from a fightâ€|she just simply wished to avoid them. Her master had taught her well. Often times he joked that he had taught her TOO well.

There they were.

"Damn. Why are they so persistent?" she cursed softly. But looking at how drunk they were, it wasn't too hard to guess why. Liquid courage in men who couldn't hold their liquor was never a good combination. They stumbled from one side of the road to the next. Chizuru found it insane to think that no one seemed to hear their ruckus.

"More like they don't care to bother with them is more like it." One of moreâ€|robust of the group started to shout obscenities into the air to try and lure her out before falling flat onto his face in the snow. At the sight Chizuru let out a small scoff at the man but soon regretted it. All four men looked towards her hiding place.

"Damn! They have good hearing for being so drunk. Way to become too relaxed Chizuru!" she mentally scolded herself.

She sighed once more before stepping out fully into the dark alley way she had took refuge in.

"Great. Just great" she chided into the air. They came tumbling around the corner grace completely abandoned if they ever had any. Judging by the katana on their hips she had to assume they had SOME sort of fluidity to their movements at least when sober. They stood on opposite ends of the alley; Chizuru with her back to the moonlight and her four pursuers illuminated by that same light on the other end.

"Just listen boy-hiccup-why not just hand over those swoords on your-hiccup-hip there huh? You look to small to manage them anyhow", the weasely one in the front hiccupped. She almost scoffed out loud at that but was able to swallow it down before it escaped. So the weasel was their leader huh. Great.

"Look, I'm not looking for a fight. I just want some food and a warm bed. Leave now and spare yourselves humiliation alright?" She did not want to do this right now. She had traveled for more than two thirds of the day just to reach Kyoto, and once here, found no signs of her master. To be quite honest, she was hungry, tired, and NOT in the mood. A burley man in the back of the group pushed through to the front.

"Who do you think you are pipsqueak? Don't you know a patriot when you see one you little rat?!" he shouted at her.

"Patriot? HA! You hardly look like a cook let alone a patriot." Chizuru laughed back. This seemed to enrage the weasel of the group. He drew his sword and thrust it in front of him barely staying upright.

"Alright you little brat. I'm gonna have to teach you a lesson!" and with that he and his men charged at Chizuru. Despite their inebriated state, the men flew at her with great speed. Squaring her stance into a defensive position, she waited until they were almost on top of her before she made her move. Drawing her katana with what would seem lightening speed from its sheath, she struck the leader with the back of her katana knocking him immediately unconscious. Not taking a second to hesitate, she side stepped to the left to meet the next oncoming brute and blocked his raised sword. Pushing off of him she jumped back to the right to twirl out of the way of the third brute who swung his sword more like a hammer than a sword. The fourth and largest of the brutes was surprisingly nimble however and managed to land a small blow on her upper right shoulder. Ignoring the sudden searing pain from her shoulder, she spun around and sliced the man's extended arm creating a large gaping gash from his shoulder to his forearm.

She had no intention of harming these men when this started out, but obviously, they had a killing intent towards her that she could not simply ignore. In a world such as this, it was kill or be killed. As the man screamed in pain from his freshly opened wound, the leader slowly began to regain consciousness.

"Whatâ€| howâ€| why you littleâ€|!" Before he could complete his next sentence however, a loud inhuman screech sounded from behind Chizuru. Quickly she spun to the around and met a sight she would not easily forget. In front of her stood what appeared to be two men, however their faces, darkened by the moon illuminating them from behind were grotesque. The shadows over their faces could not hide their glowing red eyes are their white twisted smiles.

"Bloodâ€|..blood! Give me...blood!" The one on the left screamed. He charged forward straight past Chizuru to the man she had cut. In a quick moment, he had sliced off her attackers head and began to mutilate his body.

"Kamisamaâ€|.what on earth?" Before she could say more, the second inhuman figure lurched forward and began to attack the group's leader who had tried to come to his subordinates aid. The scene quickly unfolded into a blood bath. All four men who had previously been attacking Chizuru, where cut down in mere seconds by these blood thirsty men. "Where they men at all?" Chizuru thought to herself in horror.

The first of the two to charge at her attackers, now covered in thick oozing blood, slowly turned his head over his shoulder to stare at her.

"Moreâ€|.I wantâ€|moreâ€|" he groaned. A sick twisted smile covered his face again. She knew exactly what that meant. Slowly he turned all the way around to face her. His sword still in his hand, dripped red blood onto the snow as he slowly and awkwardly started to walk towards her.

"Shit", she cursed mentally to herself. She knew what this was. She had seen it once before. But how on earth where they here in Kyoto? She thought she had stopped this in Edo? She didn't have time to think of that though. Instinct was kicking in; years of training moved her body for her. She took up a defensive stance once again. A slight twinge in her shoulder reminded her of her situation. She was bleedingâ€|and these menâ€|theseâ€|.creaturesâ€|wanted her blood too. Before the crazed men could take one more step, a sharp gust of wind blew Chizuru's clothes forward towards her new attackers.

To anyone else, they would have missed what happened next. In the blink of an eye, a man dressed in the same garb as these two crazed men cut her opponents down. If she had had the time to admire this new player she would have. However, her skin prickled as she felt the tell-tale sign of a blade at her throat.

"Drop your sword. Do it now or I will kill you too", a deep voice spoke from behind her. She knew that tone; it was a no nonsense kind of tone. She maneuvered her sword slowly so that the blade pointed directly at the ground and released it knowing full well that the weight of the sword would drive it into the ground to stick straight up. She then dropped to her knees and placed both of her arms straight out to her sides to show that she meant them no harm and that she would comply.

The prickling on her skin went away letting her know that whoever was behind her had removed his katana from her neck. She did not like this; all she wanted to do was get some warm food in her belly and find a place to sleep. Was that too much for a woman to ask for? The

man who disposed of the crazed men walked slowly up to her and spoke to the man behind her.

"What should we do with the bodies sir?"

"So this man is not the one in charge. His skill is great, I can only imagine what his leader is like", she thought to herself.

"We will have to dispose of them. Call in the men from the patrol and have them take of it," spoke the man behind her.

"Ahâ€|.so you are the leader hmm?" she silently scoffed.

"And what of this one sir? It is obvious he has seen too much."

She could have laughed out loud, but she thought better of it and once again held her tongue.

"If only you knew what I knew," she laughed in her head.

"Take him back to headquarters. We will decide what to do with him there." Chizuru seriously almost laughed out loud at that one. Was her disguise so good? At that, a third voice sounded from behind her to her right.

"But commanderâ€|wouldn't it be easier just to get rid of the kid now?"

"Okita, hold your tongue or I will cut it out myself."

"So this third party was known as Okita? I will put that to memory" Chizuru thought to herself. The one called Okita spoke again.

"And Saito, must you have all the fun? I was so ready to finally have some fun and you just stormed right it and took it all for yourself."

"I am sorry I have displeased you Okita. I was simply doing my job," spoke the man in front her.

"These men sure are free with their names. Okita and Saito", Chizuru thought as she made another mental note.

"Both of you, let's go. We are wasting time. Take his weapons from him and tie him up. Okita, since you are so eager, you will escort him to his temporary room for the night", spoke their commander.

"But Hijikata-sanâ€| "

"Enough. Do it."

She now had all the names of her captors. The one known as Saito bent down and took her katana and scabbard from her hip and proceeded to place her sword into its sheath. She couldn't help but notice the look on his face when he evaluated her katana. She hid her smirk by lowering her face. The other man, Okita, began to tie her hands behind her back.

"Look kid, don't get any bright ideas. I will kill you if you try to

run." She turned her face towards his and silently evaluated him.

"No need for threats Okita", spoke their commander "he won't be able to." Before she could begin to figure out what that meant, she felt a hard blow to the back of her head.

"Those bastards!" were her last thoughts and she drifted into darkness.

2. Chapter 2

Chapter Two

She awoke when she felt herself being tied up even more in a slightly warmer environment. She remained still however to refrain from letting her captors know she had risen from herâ€|less than peaceful slumber. She pictured the knots in her head as the individual tied her up.

"Simple enough. They must truly think me incompetent if these are all they will tie me up with. *sigh* just makes my job that much easier is suppose", she thought to herself. However, she must admitâ€|while they were simple knots, they were using quite a few.

"Alright, maybe these guys aren't so simple", she mused. After a short period of time, the individual must have been content with her bindings and exited the room. When they closed the door, Chizuru found herself in utter darkness. Her eyes sprang open to exam her surroundings.

"Good. This room is simple. Nothing to make noise with should I bump into anything."

She slowly began to work at the knots that kept her hands bound behind her back. It would take awhile, but she could manage. After about ten minutes of silent struggle, the ropes came free. Slowly, she raised herself into a crouched position.

"I never know, they could be right outside that door. I must take care not to let anyone know that I am awakeâ€|.and free." With cat like grace, she slowly slinked towards the corner where the door remained shut. She didn't dare move a muscle; no, she only listened. She heard soft breathing outside the door.

"Well, there goes that exit", she grumbled. She took in the room once more. Looking up, she evaluated the ceiling.

"Hmmâ€|.I can easily move those tiles and pull myself up there." She slowly rose to a standing position and began to reach for the tiles. She gently pushed one of the tiles free and slid it to the side. Before she climbed up into the ceiling, she grabbed the ropes that had once bound her.

"I can leave these up in the ceiling and they will think I simply ran away or disappeared."

Crouching enough to give her the proper advantage, she silently leapt up into the rafters. Once she pulled herself all the way up, she slid

the tile back into place.

"Kamisama! When's the last time the cleaned up here?" She shouted in her head, fighting back the urge to sneeze.

"Alright, focus. I need to find a suitable place to get down in so I can get out of here." Slowly she began crawling forward in search of an exit. She had mapped out in her head the dimensions of the room she was placed in and once far enough, quietly removed a tile to peer into the dark area underneath her. Silently, she poked her head into what appeared to be another vacant room. Seeing no one, and hearing no one, she slowly began to lower herself down into the room.

Dropping down into a crouch position, she reevaluated the room. It was dark just as the room she was in previously. Slowly she crept towards the door and listened once more for any movement or breathing from outside.

She heard none. Gingerly, she grasped the door and began to slide it open. Poking her head outside, she looked left and right and saw no one. There was a garden out in front of her and a stone wall just past it. Turning around once more into the room, she returned to her makeshift entrance and placed the tile back into its proper place.

"I don't want to leave any signs of my escape now do I? Master would be appalled if I did." She almost chuckled at that thought. Moving silently to the door again, she peeked outside once more to make sure the coast was clear. It was. She opened the door wider and stepped fully outside. The air was cold and fresh snow had fallen to cover the world once again. She slid the door closed before she started creeping down the wall. In the corner of the little garden, there was a tree. If she could just get to that tree, she could jump onto it and climb over the stone wall without leaving footprints. Before she could go any further, she froze. She could hear someone stirring in the room she had just passed. Had they heard her? Had they seen her shadow?

"How? I didn't make a sound!", she shouted in her head. She had to think quickly. If she broke out into a run, she could probably make it. Then again she would also most likely wake everyone in this compound and send them chasing after her. She placed her hand on her hip but became extremely alarmed doing so. Her swords, they had taken them.

"Shit!" she cursed in her head. "How could I have been so careless as to forget!?" She had to get her swords back. She would kill everyone here in this place if she had to, but she would get her swords back. The rustling in the room next to her became louder. Looking up she saw rafters and quickly jumped up pulling her body along with her to conceal herself in the shadows. Unfortunately, there was not enough room so she had to hold her body up with just her arms. She hadn't done training like this in a long time.

"But this isn't training. So focus girl, or you could lose your life." The door underneath her slip open to reveal a shadowy figure. They stepped out and let out a huge yawn before turning to close their door. While they were turned, she dropped down behind what she assumed was a man placed them in a hold with her hand over their mouth and the other hand wrapped around their head, so that if they should make any noise, she could snap their neck to quickly put an

end to it. Whoever it was that she was now holding, was more than just a little surprised. They stiffened but remained surprisingly calm.

Chizuru nudged him into the room from where he came and slid the door closed with her foot. Keeping the one hand over his mouth, she released the other to grab his hand and twist it around to pin it to his back while bringing her foot around to drop him to the floor. They landed next to a rumpled bed. She placed her knee into his back and bent down to whisper in his ear, "If you so much as make a sound, I will not hesitate to kill youâ€|Okita." She had recognized him when she put her knee into his back. At the sound of his name, Okita stiffened more. Obviously he had not been expecting THAT.

"Listen carefully, you took something that belongs to me. It is very important to me and if you are half the warrior you claim to be, you should understand that. I want them back. Where are they?" Her tone was hushed, but anyone could have picked up the hostile intent clearly portrayed in her voice.

"Do you think you can help me with that?" she asked him. It was obvious however that Okita had no intention of complying for he began to struggle. Making a quick judgment, she pinched the nerve in his neck and he instantly passed out.

"Perhaps killing is a little extreme, but I seriously need my swords", she whispered into the air. "I'm sorry for thisâ€|Okita." Chizuru picked herself off of Okita and began to push him back onto his sleeping mat. Once done, she stalked towards the door. Opening it just enough for her to fit through, Chizuru slipped back into the dark night. There was heavy cloud coverage tonight, which would aid her in her escape. She stood still contemplating her next move.

"How in the world am I supposed to find my swords? They could be anywhere in here! Arghâ€|.why does this have to be so complicated!?" Chizuru snapped back into reality quickly ducking into a crouching position and sweeping her leg out to trip up her new pursuer. Her opponent caught unaware by her fell to the ground hard. Obviously he was not expecting her to be so perceptive. Chizuru then leapt on top of the man pinning him down with her legs and snatched his smaller sword from his hip and placed the blade mere millimeters from his jugular. The man was quick though, for he too had his already drawn katana at her throat as well. What stopped them both however they could not tell.

"Saito. You are the one they call Saito correct?", she asked him quietly. His eyes grew a fraction wider at her question. Regaining focus though he simply nodded.

"Then you are the one who took my katanas from me. I want them back. Where are they?", she growled out.

"For someone trying so desperately to escape, you must surely have a good reason. Perhaps our commander will listen to you now seeing your dedication." His tone was low, even and calm despite his current predicament.

"How do I know what you speak is true? How do I know that you will not slice me to bits as soon as I release you?" Her questions were quite valid. After all, they had taken her captive and refused to

give her an audience. She had no way of knowing, that had she have remained in her bindings that they would not have killed her in the morning.

"You have my word. You will be heard", was his only reply. They sat there for a few more moments, before Chizuru came to a decision. Rising slowly, keeping the tip of the blade pointed in his direction, she backed off a few paces allowing him to get up himself. Once up, Saito slowly put his blade away and raised his hands slightly in front of him to show no ill intention or harm.

"If you please, might I have my sword back? I shall not harm you. You have my word that I will be your personal escort to be sure of that. However, should my commander order me to kill you once you have been heard, know that I shall not hesitate." She could see, even in the dark, that his eyes spoke the truth.

"Very well. I wish to speak with your commander now." She pointed the blade down and offered him the pummel of his katana. He took it gracefully and sheathed it in its proper place at his hip.

"Everyone must be gathered first. Please come with me." As they walked Chizuru could not help but be slightly puzzled at the lack of tension in the air. She had literally just put this man in a life threatening position, yet he was being very civil with her. His sense of duty must be strong was her only thought on the subject.

"Could I please have your name so that I may inform my commander accordingly?" was his only question on their short travel.

"My name is Chizuru. That is all you need to know for now." He nodded slightly and continued walking.

"This should be very interesting. Very interesting indeed" , she mused silently.

3. Chapter 3

Chapter Three

There had been quite a commotion when it was announced that their captive had escaped and nearly maimed two of the Shinsengumi captains. Chizuru was placed in the same room from which she escaped, and she couldn't help but smirk at their faces upon entering. With no signs of an escape and no rope left behind, it was something very new to the Shinsengumi. She sat there now, in the center of the room, waiting to be summoned once again when all of the captains were assembled. The sliding of the door alerted her that it was time. It was Saito who opened the door.

"Chizuru, my commander will now see you." He stepped to the side and motioned for her to step through and follow him. As they made their way towards wherever the rest of them were assembled, Chizuru evaluated Saito. He was tall and lean and she could tell that he would have just the right amount of muscles under his clothing from years of training. She thought back to her first encounter with him and was impressed by his speed. She had never even heard his blade being drawn.

"He must surely be a master of Iai. And he is a lefty. Interesting." She glanced at his right hip where a katana lay strapped. She knew very well that it was highly frowned upon to hold your katana in your left hand. If you ever did, you were told you had no talent or that you were stupid. She trained with a few others under her master that were left-handed. Unlike others however, her master had been smart and allowed them to keep their stance. Left-handed individuals were just as strong as those who were right handed. She had a few scars to prove that.

Saito stopped finally at a door and opened it to reveal what would appear to be a main room. It was fairly large and could seat quite a few. Currently, it housed eleven in total. Saito motioned for her to take a seat in the middle of the room, which she did so cautiously. She couldn't help but feel nervous without her swords. She would have to make sure that they were given back to her.

"So this is the pipsqueak you guys brought back? Seems pretty small to be making so much trouble." He looked well young. He had large deep green eyes and long hair that sat high in a ponytail.

"You're one to talk there kid. He looks just as young as you do Heisuke! HAHAHA!" The one he referred to as Heisuke threw a punch towards the man but missed as he dodged.

"I'm not that young you old fart! You and Shinpachi always have to say stuff like that" , Heisuke shouted.

"Harada and I are NOT old you little brat!" This one must be Shinpachi. He had short, spiky hair held back by a green bandana and soft green eyes and a charming smile surprisingly. The one she assumed was Harada had red hair tied back low, a soft smile that Chizuru was sure he was never without, and an odd wrapping around his waist.

"I hardly think I am nearly old enough to look like a dad. You must be referring to Shinpachi!" he laughed out. The three sat together on the right side of the room. Looking towards the front, Chizuru could actually recognize a few faces. Okita sat next to Saito on the left side of the room and the one known as their commander Hijikata sat in the front next to two other men she did not recognize. She also saw three others sitting at the back of the room when she first entered, but considering their silence; she assumed she was not supposed to notice.

"Truly an interesting group of men here. Judging by their brawn, they are all highly experienced. I should tread cautiously", she thought to herself.

It was Hijikata who spoke first. "Enough already you three. It's time to hear what this boy has to say."

"Ahem yes. My name is Isami Kondo and this here is my vice Commander Toshizo Hijikata and my general Keisuke Sanan." The one known as Sanan coughed slightly and Hijikata blanched.

"Kondo-san, is it necessary to go through complete introductions at the moment?" asked Hijikata. At this, Kondo began to become worried.

"Ahemâ€|ugh..yes. Perhaps you are right. That wasâ€|unnecessary. Umâ€|wellâ€|back to the issue, you seem to haveâ€|witnessed something that you should have not, correct?" The question was obviously directed to her. She contemplated how to answer for a moment. She was sure that she knew things about the creatures she encountered that the Shinsengumi did not. But should she let them know that was the real question. All eyes rested on Chizuru now.

"There are many things which you do not know; both about meâ€|and about what I saw. If you let me, I will explain everything. But first, I have questions of you."

Hijikata spoke loudly at this. "We are the ones who are asking the questions here. You obviously saw something you shouldn't have and now you think you can use it against us? It is your life on the line here, not ours."

"What I saw is nothing new to me. I have fought many creatures such as those that I came in contact with last night." At this revelation, a silent gasp went through the room. The tension was now thick in the room.

"What exactly do you mean by that?" Hijikata's eyes where now strikingly focus solely on her.

"If you wish me to answer that question, answer mine first. How did you get a hold of the Water of Life?" Now the room fell deathly silent. All eyes were focused on her, but she did not break eye contact with Hijikata. This was something she needed to know desperately.

"My name is Chizuru Yukimara, and I have come to Kyoto to look for my father. About two months ago he came here to Kyoto on business and never returned. I received letters from him daily almost but after about two weeks, they stopped all together. He is a doctor of western medicine, and seeing as how you either have the Water of Life, or somehow came into contact with it, he was here. How do you know my father?" She spoke slowly so that everyone in the room would understand her. She did not want any misunderstandings. It was already a bold enough choice to tell them this much information.

Hijikata and Kondo passed a look before Hijikata sighed and began to speak. "Your father did come through here. He was hired to be our doctor for a time. However, about a month ago there was a fire in his clinic and he disappeared. There were no signs of a body so we assume that something must have happened. We too have been looking for him."

"That still does not explain how you have the Water of Life." This was becoming more and more difficult by the minute.

Sanan spoke next. "Your father came to us with the Water of Life saying that it could keep a man from dying. However he did not tell us what it would do to them. How do you know of the Water of Life and its effects?"

Chizuru sighed before telling more of her story. "Before he left for Kyoto, myâ€|master and he were working on something that they said

could make a man stronger. I thought the idea itself was absurd, but they swore they were close to a breakthrough. One night, I heard a large crashing from my father's personal study where the two of them had locked themselves in for most of the day. Concerned, I went over to make sure they were okay, but what I found wasâ€|shocking." All eyes seemed glued to Chizuru.

"My master was convulsing on the floor and my father sat shocked by his desk. I ran to my master's side but stopped when I saw his face. His hair had turned white and his eyes red. He had stopped his convulsing, but his shoulders still shook. Before I could figure out what was going on, he jumped at my father crying out for blood. Iâ€|I killed him, or so i thought. I didn't know what else to do. Before anything could be said, my master, who I thought had been dead, leaped from the floor and burst out of the window. After some explanation, it turned out it was the...elixir they had been working on. While it did heal a man, it drove them mad with the need for blood. That night I made my father swear to me he would never use it again on anyone. Shortly after, he was called here to Kyoto."

The room sat in silence at this new finding. Chizuru glanced around the room at the captain's of the Shinsengumi. They all seemed to be digesting what she had told them.

"I have made it my personal mission to find my master who escaped and to find my father after he went missing. Now however, it would appear that things are much worse than I had imagined. My father has not stopped using the elixir and now he is spreading this...plague throughout Japan. I must stop him and put an end to my master's tyranny. I have been following reports of murders throughout the country side that have lead me here to Kyoto...where my father last was. I can only begin to guess that they have reunited...and seek to continue their efforts." Chizuru took a deep breath for a moment before slowly scanning everyone's faces. Each one of the Shinsengumi captain's appeared deep in though. Once more she took another deep breath before speaking again.

"Also, there is something that I must say now before this progresses any further. I am not a man, but I am a woman." Every head in the room shot up at this confession. It was obvious that they had no clue she was a women.

"A woman!?" Shinpachi exclaimed. Harada scratched his head sheepishly and Hesiuke simply gawked.

"To say that we actually had a woman bound in a room all night", came from behind her.

"Actually, if you remember, we are her because heâ€|ahemâ€|she escaped." It was Saito who spoke up. She glanced towards him and Okita and Okita blushed slightly. He turned his head away from her.

"Well actually, if you really look, she is kind of girly looking." Harada blushed slightly at the little glare Chizuru gave him. Kondo looked the most perturbed. He continued to mutter things to himself. Words like woman, bound and boy could be heard every once and again. Hijikata let out a cough gaining everyone's attention.

"Seeing as we have a mutual objective, we will let you stay here.

However, I must ask you to remain dressed as a man, for if a woman were to be found living here at the headquartersâ€|. " He let the last bit of the sentence trail off knowing full well everyone got his meaning.

"Of course. I understand. And I thank you for your hospitality. I must ask permission to look for my father though. Obviously he has disobeyed my wishes to never use the Water of Life again. I do not know what his intent is, but I wish to be the one to put an end to it. I am however, very grateful for any assistance you can spare me." Chizuru bowed politely. Hearing this broke Kondo out of his musings.

"But of course. We will lend you any assistance you may require. Inoue, could you please show Miss Chizuru to a vacant room?" Kondo's query was addressed to someone behind her. Chizuru stood and bowed politely once more and turned to see who would be leading her. From the shadows, stepped three men. One, who she assumed was Inoue, stepped up to her and bowed slightly and greeted her cheerfully.

"My name is Genzaburo Inoue. This here is Susumu Yamazaki and Kai Shimada. We apologize greatly for our earlier treatment of you." Shimada, a slightly larger man than the rest wore a kind smile and gave a nod of agreement with Inoue's apology. Yamazaki, a smaller man, though she did not think of him as any less lethal, bowed slightly as well and actually gave her a small smirk. She defiantly found him intriguing.

"Thank you. No apology is needed. I understand why you had to do what you did." Chizuru bowed slightly back sending a small smirk of her own back to Yamazaki. He arched an eyebrow in surprise but showed no other emotion. Inoue made a small move towards the door but before he could go further, Chizuru turned back around to face the front of the room once more.

"Before I go, I would first like to thank Saito for granting me this audience with you." Making eye contact with him, she bowed deeply to show her true appreciation of his actions. His eyes widened but in return he also bowed to her.

"Secondly, I would also like to thank everyone here for hearing me out and being so compassionate and hospitable." She again bowed. "But before I or anyone else leaves, I MUST request my swords back." She rose from her bow to stand as tall as she could and sent a pleading look to Hijikata. His face blanched for a mere second before he nodded his head. Behind her, she heard movement and so turned to find Yamazaki coming towards her producing her beloved swords. She almost cried out in relief but bowed to Yamazaki and Hijikata in thanks.

"Thank you very much! I wish you all a good night." With that, she secured her katanas once more at her hip and proceeded to follow a slightly stunned Inoue out the door and to her new room.

4. Chapter 4

Chapter Four

Chizuru slept well despite the night's events and residing in a

strange place. She felt secure once again with her swords at her side. Waking up with the sunrise as she usually did, she set herself about preparing for the day. She would need to buy new clothes for the ones she wore now were covered in blood now that she actually had time to see.

"Perhaps they will let me go into town today to purchase some new ones." She would need to buy something male of course, but also some female clothes as well. She expected there to be times when being a female would not be such a bad thing. Fully dressed now with her swords secured at her hip, she opened the door to breath in the fresh morning air.

Thankfully, they gave her a room that still had a great view of the little garden and courtyard she had tried to escape from just the night before. It would be a good place to practice her swordsmanship and her katas in, as well as a very pretty view. The garden itself was small, but very quaint. It had a small pond off in the left corner with coy fish, a sakura tree and a little fountain.

She walked into the courtyard and began to stretch. Sure, she had used her blade just last night, but she still practiced every morning. It was drilled into her over years of training and practice. As she stretched a chill ran through her body. She would need to remember to buy a haori too.

Pulling her sword from its sheath, she swung it in slow circles on each side of her body to warm up her arms while bouncing on her toes. Feeling prepared, she slowly began her katas. Closing her eyes she practically danced through her katas that her master had taught her so long ago. To anyone watching, she looked lethal and beautiful all at once. A slight sheen of sweat now coated her skin.

No matter how could it was, every time she practiced she would become hot. Her master's katas were no joke that was for sure. Opening her eyes she took on an attack stance and started practicing different attacks and approaches. Really sweating now, she switched to a defensive posture and practiced her blocks. The whole routine took only an hour, but it was worth it every morning.

Finally finished, she sheathed her sword and wiped sweat off of her forehead. She closed her eyes and leaned her head back to let her skin drink in the rising sun. She wasn't like most girls her age who fretted of skin complexion or what clothes she wore. Her father and her master had both taught her that looks did not matter and that she was the most beautiful when she was herself. She had always laughed at them when they said things like that, but she appreciated it in the end.

Sensing an audience she opened her eyes and looked in the direction she felt the stares coming from. Both Saito and Yamazaki sat motionless in the corner. Saito looked almost as if he was analyzing her while Yamazaki looked like he greatly approved.

"Good morning Saito. Good morning Yamazaki. I hope you slept well?" Chizuru had every intention of being all politeness from now on. Chizuru and the Shinsengumi now understood each other and shared a common goal; to find her father and to figure out the meaning of this Water of Life.

Yamazaki broke the silence first and greeted her a good morning as well. Saito followed shortly after with his own small good morning.

"I actually have a request today...if it wouldn't be too much trouble?" she asked hesitantly.

"And what might that be Yukimara?" Saito asked.

"Please, call me Chizuru. My request is to be allowed to go into town today to purchase some new clothing. Mine are covered in blood and I only possess this pair." Saito and Yamazaki shared a quick glance.

"I believe that could be arrangedâ€|Chizuru." Saito slightly inclined his head while saying her name.

"I thank you. Would it be possible to have some clothes lent to me in the meantime? I do not think it would be very acceptable for me to go into town dressed as I am right now." Saito gave her a once over and nodded his head.

"Yes. Give me a moment and I will get you some temporary clothing. Breakfast will be started shortly. I am sure you are hungry after your exercises." With that, Saito turned and started down the hallway towards what she believed would be the direction of the kitchen.

"And you Yamazaki? What are your plans for the day?" Chizuru asked politely.

"I am actually being sent out on a mission so I am afraid I will be gone for a short while."

"That is unfortunate. I wish you luck on your mission. Please return safely." Chizuru gave a small bow and he returned it in kind.

"I thank you. I wish you luck with finding your father as well. Hopefully we can be of assistance in your quest." And with that Yamazaki too left Chizuru to stand alone in the courtyard. However she did not have to wait long before the young Heisuke came barreling down the corridor. He froze in place at seeing her though. She smiled sweetly and giggled slightly.

"Good morning Toudou. I see you slept well!" She giggled her greeting to him. He seemed to be very pleased with this for a wide toothy grin broke out onto his face. He scratched behind his head and sheepishly laughed as well.

"Good morning Chizuru. I did sleep well thank you", he paused for a moment considering her before continuing, "Actuallyâ€|Chizuruâ€|you can drop the honorific and just call me Heisuke. Everyone else does and we look to be about the same age anyway." He blushed a slight pink while saying this. Chizuru's eyes grew big for a moment before she smiled sweetly.

"If it is truly okay with you, then I shall." His smile grew bigger now.

"Great! Let's start again then shall we? Hi, my name is Heisuke!"

"It's great to meet you!" He bowed and smiled up at Chizuru. She responded with her own smile and bow.

"It's nice to meet you too Heisuke. My name is Chizuru and I am sure you and I will be fast friends."

"Great! Now Chizuru lets go get some breakfast before Shinpachi and Harada eat it all!" She laughed at this and began to follow Heisuke to breakfast. It was hard to believe that he was a captain of the Shinsengumi. He seemed very light hearted and care free. She hoped he could stay that way.

As they walked down the hall, she could smell the food cooking and hear the other captain's of the Shinsengumi talking. Her stomach growled loudly and she blushed in embarrassment. Heisuke laughed lightly and reassured her he would make sure she got an extra helping. She smiled at his kindness but couldn't help but feel a little nervous. After all, it was just last night that they had captured her, she escaped and nearly hurt two of their members. She wasn't too sure how everyone else at breakfast would react to her presence.

"Well, there's only one way to find out I suppose", she thought idly. She squared her shoulders as Heisuke opened the door to the dining room and followed him inside.

"Here goes nothing!"

5. Update

Hey guys! Thank you so much for all of your reviews! They really mean a lot to me! However I am having serious computer problems right now. They are so bad in fact that I have to buy a new computer all together. I should have one by tonight, but it will take me some time to remake the next chapter that I lost. I'm glad everyone likes the story so far! Just a few hints on were I plan to go with this, yes things are good for right now, but something is about to come down the pipe that is going to really knock Chizuru for a loop. And yes, Kazama will be showing up sometime soon. Don't worry, I haven't forgot about him! ;) If you guys have any suggestions, please feel free to tell me! I'm all ears! Thanks again for the support and I will try to keep you updated with the progress. I hope to at least get a chapter out every two days. I am active duty military so sometimes I may not be able to write for a while. But like I said, I will do my best to keep you guys updated!

6. Another Update

Okay guys! I finally got a new computer. I'm working through a couple of...other technical difficulties...like the fact that my expensive new computer DIDN'T come with Microsoft Office...I.E. Word...so I am currently purchasing that as well. Tomorrow I should have the 5th chapter up however. I was able to write a lot of the fifth chapter on my down town so it should be pretty quick to type it up and post it. Thanks for your patience in this by the way! I have honestly been dying to post the next two chapters really bad, plus I've had a lot of time to think about what is gonna happen next. I definitely think you will like the next few chapters. We will learn a bit about

Chizuru's past and run into someone that no one saw coming. So again...thank you for being patient...I just ask that you can be patient for just a LITTLE while longer. Love you guys!

7. Chapter 5

Chapter Five

A silence enveloped the room when Heisuke and Chizuru entered. A faint blush dawned her face when she noticed everyone staring at her. It was obvious they were not expecting her to join them. She quickly bowed and made a movement to leave the room.

"I apologize. It was very forward of me to intrude upon your breakfast. If you'll excuse me, I shall return to my room with my breakfast. Good morning." She bowed and turned to find her path to be blocked by Hijikata. He gave a small chuckle along with Kondo and Sanan.

"There is no need to run. We don't bite I promise", spoke Kondo from around Hijikata. He gave her a warm smile and a pat on the head as he walked past to take his seat. Sanan gave a slight bow as he passed her to sit on Kondo's right side. Her blush turned a darker shade of red as she once again looked Hijikata in the face.

"You can eat your meals with us Chizuru. I see no reason why you shouldn't be able to. However I must warn you that these are men that you dine with and they can be quite animal-like during meals." He glanced at Shinpachi and Heisuke over Chizuru's head with a pointed look. Heisuke dipped his head has Shinpachi let out a large bellow of a laugh as Chizuru turned around.

"What can I say? I love a good meal and some sake!"

"I wouldn't have to fight for my food if it weren't for Shinpachi always stealing my food!" Heisuke spoke in his defense.

"I'm bigger than you! Therefore I need more food", Shinpachi laughed.

"Yeah well I'm still growing so that means I need it more than you!" Obviously this was a common episode during meal times. Hijikata took his place in the last vacant seat at the head of the room.

"If you still do not wish to eat here, I would not blame you." Hijikata hid a small smile as he said this.

"I think I can speak for everyone when I say that we would enjoy your company though Chizuru. It's not every day that we get to have such fine company." It was Harada who finally spoke up. He wore his common smile and a twinkle in his eye as he spoke making Chizuru blush.

"I would hardly say that my company is of any value Harada." Chizuru found herself blushing a lot this morning. She caught Okita in the corner grinning like he was up to something. Okita definitely made her wary. He was obviously up to no good.

"We are just dying to know more about you Chi-zu-ru." He enunciated each syllable of her name in a sing song voice. "Won't you share with

us a little about your past hmm?" He grinned wider at her obvious embarrassment at being singled out.

"I don't feel like my past is interesting enough to be shared. I would surely bore everyone with such details." She spoke softly while taking a seat. Okita rose from his position at the door and sat down on her right side. Saito walked in and sat down on her left. He had been absent from the conversation for some time now.

He looked at her and after a brief moment finally spoke, "Chizuru. I have gathered some replacement clothing for you to wear. It is in your room now." Chizuru accepted the much needed distraction and beamed at him.

"Thank you very much Saito!" From across the room, Harada had to stifle his laugh at Saito's small blush that crept across his face at Chizuru's smile. Chizuru then looked to the front of the room at Kondo and Hijikata.

"Actually, I wished to ask permission to travel into town today to purchase some new clothing and to search for the whereabouts of my father and my master." A frown appeared on Hijikata's face at her request.

"I don't know about that. Things have gotten much more dangerous in the streets. We protect the people of Kyoto, but many don't take kindly to us. And with the rising unrestâ€ť tensions have risen", spoke Kondo as he wore a thoughtful expression and rubbed his chin.

"She has however demonstrated that she is more than capable of holding her own in a fight though", spoke Sanan in her defense. Chizuru offered him a small smile in thanks. He returned it with one of his own.

"Very true. What do you think Hijikata? Should we let her go?" Kondo looked to his vice commander for an answer. He sat stone faced for a long moment staring down Chizuru. She kept her face calm but her balled hands were beginning to sweat.

"If they don't let me leave this compound, how can I find my father and stop my master!?" Chizuru was beginning to panick on the inside. After a long hard moment, Hijikata's face relaxed and he sighed slightly.

"You may leave the compound. While Kyoto might be dangerous right now, I cannot see things getting better anytime soon. We both want to find your father, and who better to look for him than his own daughter. However, you must have an escort whenever you leave the compound, so you will have to leave with the patrols. Okita, Heisuke. I believe you two have patrols today correct?"

"I have it in the evening, so I think she should go with Okita today", spoke Heisuke. He looked slightly disappointed, but pleased that she would be able to leave the compound at least.

"She can come, but know this Chizuru", when he said her name he made sure that she was looking him straight in the eye before speaking again, "I cannot guarantee your safety. If you get yourself into trouble you had better be able to get yourself out." He spoke in a

serious tone but his face said he was only jokingâ€|maybe.

"What are you talking about Okita!? Why do you think I'm making sure she leaves with you you idiot! You will not just leave her to the hounds!" Hijikata roared. Okita laughed but lifted his hands in defeat.

"I was merely joking vice commander. I understand your orders."

"Thank you very much!" She bowed to Hijikata and Okita. Breakfast finally began with idle chit chat between everyone, but it remained quiet for the most part. Only a few times did Shinpachi and Heisuke fight over food, but Hijikata quickly put an end to their squabbles.

Chizuru giggled slightly when a piece of egg went wild and flew across the room during their last quarrel. She felt extremely sensitive however to both Saito and Okita's watchful eyes. She felt like they were examining her like some sort of new creature. Perhaps it was her clothing. She was still wearing the blood stained clothes from the night before. Perhaps she smelled? She picked at her shirt lightly to smell it and nearly gagged.

She did smell, and bad. She heard Okita chuckle next to her and stiffened. She was blushing now. She turned to Saito who was already staring at her. Her blush turned a shade darker and it almost looked like he had a slight blush of his own.

"Umâ€|Saito, I know I have already asked a lot from you, and I thank you for bringing me some clothing to change into, but is there perhaps somewhere I can bathe? I must admit, I smell quite horrible." She finished her request starring at her hands. A moment passed before he cleared his throat making her look up.

"Yes. There is a place where you can bathe. I can take you there afterâ€|if you would like?" He seemed almost hesitant. She nodded her head and replied with a thank you before finishing her meal. Once she was done, she stood and bowed and thanked everyone for the meal, then picked up her tray and followed Saito out of the room.

She followed him silently into a kitchen where they both washed their trays and dishes. The silence was actually quite comfortable and they moved about the kitchen with ease, with Saito showing Chizuru where everything was stored. Only once did they bump into each other when they both tried to put their plates away. Saito remained calm and took her plate away from her while she blushed madly.

"What is wrong with me? I'm never like this!" Chizuru shouted in her head. Clearing his throat again, Saito signaled for her to follow him again. She did so obediently and found herself back at her room. She went inside quickly to retrieve the clothes Saito had found for her before following him to what appeared to be the back of the compound. There was a fenced in spring with large rocks and a small waterfall that poured into the spring. It was actually quite charming.

"Okita will be leaving in another hour, so I do not suggest you take long." With that, Saito turned and left Chizuru to her business. She waited till he disappeared around the corner before undressing. As she did, crusted blood kept part of the fabric from falling off her

right shoulder. She had completely forgotten that one of the drunk men had actually been able to land a blow on her.

She dipped her hand into the semi lukewarm water and washed away the dried blood. There was a pink mark that dawned her skin, but to anyone else, it would look like a simple scratch. It was large and about an inch wide. She sighed and looked at her reflection in the water. Just when would this little gem of hers be unveiled?

Ever since she was a child, small scratches would always heal fast. Her father Kodo had always told her to keep it a secret. Only when she was about thirteen did she realize that there was something different about her from other children. She stood up after a moment and continued to disrobe. She placed her swords on a rock close to the water before slowly stepping in.

The temperature of the water slowly warmed her body up from the brisk winter weather. No more snow had fallen since last night, but it was still very cold outside. She scrubbed at her body, taking care to be ginger with her right shoulder before taking her hair out. Her hair cascaded down her shoulders as she released it from its binding resting just above her hips. It felt like it was not too long ago that she had cut it, but it had grown fast. She dunked under the water finally and scrubbed at her hair. Finally finished, she stepped out of the water and began to wring her hair out.

Satisfied that her hair was dry enough, she tied it back into a high ponytail. Kneeling next to the pile of clean clothes Saito had found her, she began to finally look at what he had gathered. There was a white undershirt and a small dark blue shirt to wear over top. The hakama were not as long as her previous pair, but with the boots she had worn, she would still be able to tuck them into the top of her boots. There was also a light blue sash and a pair of clean socks to wear as well.

"Wowâ€|he really thought of everything. I'm surprised there is someone, or was someone small enough to fit these." She laughed quietly and began to dress herself. After tightening the straps on her boots, she stood and grabbed her swords, tucking them into the sash on her right hip. She hadn't realized it before, but after a warm bath and some clean clothes, she felt even better than she had when she woke up. She glanced up at the sun which was now much higher in the sky and gave a small sigh.

"Perhaps this won't be too bad", she thought idly before turning and starting back towards the main hall to meet up with Okita.

8. Chapter 6

Chapter Six

Chizuru placed her dirty clothes in her room before heading towards the direction of the main gate. As she walked, she took in her surroundings putting the layout of the compound to memory. Just from what she had seen, she could tell that the compound was somewhat large. It would have to be to house all of the soldiers. For a brief moment she paused in her travels to watch a group of soldier's spar in another courtyard towards the center of the compound.

"I wonder who these soldier's belong toâ€|they can't be Okita's. They should be ready to go here soon." She watched their techniques for a moment before continuing towards the gate once more. She was so deep in thought evaluating the soldier's movements in her head that she almost passed the gate without even noticing.

"Someone seems to be deep in thought there Chi-zu-ru." Okita's laughter broker her musings and she turned to face him full on. All the captains were gathered at the gate for some reason along with Okita's soldiers. Only Okita and his men wore the white and blue haori's of the Shinsengumi however. She was about to throw a witty remark back at Okita before she realized, silence had once again fallen because of her presence.

She looked at the other captains. Harada wore a dumbfounded look that mirrored Shinpachi's look of surprise and Heisuke was blushing a deep red. Saito's cheeks were dusted faint pink along with Okita she now realized. Standing next to the gate stood Shimada, Yamazaki, Inoue and Hijikata. They too looked taken aback with surprise. It was Inoue who finally broke the silence. He walked past all the other men straight to Chizuru.

"Good morning Chizuru! It's great to see you again!" He leaned closer, "Forgive them, I think they were not expecting you to look so different." He straightened again before chuckling softly.

"Iâ€|do not understand, Inoue?" She stuttered a bit before continuing. "I feel that this clothing suits me rather wellâ€|I do not see the problem." She looked down at herself. As far as she could see, everything fit correctly and she was not wearing anything the wrong way. So what was the issue?

Yamazaki, silent as a cat, appeared next to her and whispered in her ear, "It is not the clothing Miss Chizuru. I think I can speak for the rest of the captain's when I say that we are all stunned by your change of appearance, mainly your hair. You look very different than you did last night or this morning. The others are just curious as to who you are." Chizuru blushed.

"My hair!?" She thought back to her earlier appearance. "I suppose I did have my hair tied much differently than it was before. I guess it appeared shorter." She was still flustered when Hijikata spoke next.

"It is that curiosity that we must extinguish." After saying this he spoke loud enough for everyone to hear. "This here is Yukimara. He will be with us from now on accompanying patrols to help us look for Kodo. You will treat him with the same respect as your captains. Is that understood?!"

All the men jumped to attention and bowed while shouting their understanding. Chizuru was stunned. She felt that it was highly unnecessary to order the men to treat her with respect when they did not even know her. She stepped forward and bowed back to Okita's men.

"I know that you do not know me at all, but I promise not to get in your way and to be as much help as I can. I hope to earn your respect in the time that I am here." She rose from her bow and turned to stand next to Yamazaki.

"I believe that you will make comrades fast here with that kind of attitude. Especially Okita's men. They do not take to newcomers well, but you seem to have pacified them for the moment. Good job", he whispered in her ear. Hijikata and Okita stepped off to the side while the rest of the captains gathered around Chizuru.

"Not bad Chizuru. Hopefully you'll learn something out there about your old man", Shinpachi spoke as he clapped her on the back.

"Shinpachi, must you always be such a brute? Chizuru, I do wish you luck though. Don't let Okita push you around too much or scare ya. He's a softie at heart." Harada laughed as he spoke.

"I find that hard to believe Harada. Okita is just as much of a brute as he is an idiot", interjected Yamazaki.

"Yamazaki, it seems you and Okita do not sit well with each other?" Chizuru mused. He made a funny face like he didn't like the taste of Okita's name in his mouth, but their chat was interrupted by Hijikata making a fuss for the patrol to begin. Chizuru waved her goodbyes and trotted after Okita at the back of the patrol.

"I'm sorry if it annoys that I am on your patrol. The last thing I want to be is a burden." Chizuru starred at her feet as they walked. Okita walked with his hands behind his head and gave her side look as they walked along.

"Nah don't be bothered by it. I don't really care. I already told you, if you get yourself into trouble, you had better get yourself out." He laughed and nudged her with his elbow. She looked up and saw that even though he spoke mean words, he didn't really mean them. Or so at least she hoped.

She laughed, "Alright, you've got yourself a deal. But that means I won't be coming to your rescue anytime soon either." Okita feigned a look of hurt before they both laughed.

"You aren't so bad kid. But if you try to run, I'll kill you", was the last thing he said with a laugh as he walked towards the front of the patrol. With that, Chizuru began to pay attention to her surroundings more. She saw some shops that she recognized from the day before where she had asked if her father had been seen. She got the same answer in almost every shop she enteredâ€¦no.

There was one particular shop she was looking for. It was a bar and the bar maiden had said she had seen a man fitting her father's description a few times. However, before she could ask more, she was confronted by the now very dead drunk fools that lead her to be where she is now.

The patrol turned left onto a main street when she saw the bar sign. She was just about to ask if she could go in when some sort of ruckus was caused on the right side of the road that dragged the attention of the patrol, and Okita to it. She gave it a second of thought before ducking into the bar.

She looked around and spotted the female she had spoken to the day before. The two spoke for a few minutes, and the only information she

found didn't help her. Just as she was leaving, she saw someone duck out of the bar. When she had first walked in, no one had been there. She stepped out of the bar and looked down the street. In the opposite direction the patrol came from, she saw the person again run around the corner into an alley way. But she caught a glimpse of their face and her heart went racing.

She knew that face. She hadn't seen that face in years, but she would recognize it anywhere. Okita looked to her from the other side of the street only to watch her sprint down it.

"What the hell!?" He shouted after her to stop but she was gone before he could really say anything. Chizuru ran faster. There they were. They turned to the right into another alley. They were fast, but Chizuru was determined.

"Wait! Stop!" She shouted after them. She was beginning to panic. He should have been dead. They had all told her he was dead. She ran faster. Turning the corner again she saw them all the way at the end of the alley the lead out into another main road.

"Damn it!" She cursed again. She ran harder and faster jumping over random boxes that laid in her path. The figure stopped at the end of the alley and turned to face her. They wore a cloak that covered their whole body, but back at the bar, she had seen just a glimpse of their face. She couldn't mistake that face for anyone.

When she was about twenty feet away she stopped. She was breathing hard and so was the person she was chasing. They stood there breathing hard for a few moments, when the person she was chasing stood tall for a moment before letting the hood of their cloak fall. All her breath left her in an instant.

It was him. They had told her he was dead. But that was him. Standing right in front of her, looking so different, but exactly the same all at once. Her hand reached out to him as she said his name softly.

"Kaoru!" He gave a wicked smile before throwing the hood back up and disappearing into the crowd of the street.

"NO!" She screamed out and just as she was about to take off after him, a hand grabbed her shoulder and whipped her around. Her momentum and the force of the arm that grabbed her caused her to fall onto her back. As quickly as she fell down she was up again in an instant with her sword drawn and ready to fight whoever was holding her back.

"What the hell Yukimara!?" Okita jumped back out of range of her sword. He looked pissed.

"What the hell was that!? You just run off out of nowhere and then turn on me? Maybe we should have killed you instead!" He was shouting at her but as he continued, his voice died down and trailed off completely. She had dropped her sword and fell to her knees while he was yelling at her and now she was sitting in the dirt in an alley sobbing her heart out.

"Aww shit...um..." He looked around trying to figure out what to do. He had never really been good with crying woman. He hated to see them

cry, but he usually didn't know what to do when they did. He lowered his arms and took a few steps towards her and crouched down in front of her.

"What is going on Chizuru?" He spoke lightly and she raised her head to look at him. "Who was that person?" When he had chased after Chizuru, just as he entered the alley he had seen a hooded figure at the end of the alley. He could only guess that it was because of that person that Chizuru was in this state of distress.

"They told me he was deadâ€|they said he was ripped apartâ€|" Chizuru's face fell into her hands again as she cried. Her words only brought more confusion to Okita. He sighed before speaking again.

"Look, do you think you can compose yourself to finish the patrol? I can't take you back now and I don't want my men to see you like this. They'll think you're a wimp, and that won't work with your cover." Chizuru looked at him again. Her cover? Okita wore a smirk and at the sight of that smirk she started laughing.

"Yeahâ€| just give me a minute. I'll be fine. Geezeâ€|my coverâ€|.thanks", she laughed out. Okita stood up and ruffled her hair as he did so.

"Yeah well I don't do too well with crying woman. So hurry up and finish so we can go." He sounded gruff but Chizuru brushed it aside. He was obviously at least a little concerned and he was still a man after all.

"We are gonna pass some shops in a little while so you can buy some new clothes there. But know this, you are gonna have some explaining to do when we get back. We can't afford to have you running off whenever you please." Chizuru stood up and dusted herself off. She figured that would happen sooner or later and now here it was.

"Alrightâ€|I understand." She bent over to pick up her dropped sword. As she began to sheath it she spoke once more, "but know this. If you tell anyone that I criedâ€|I'll kill you." She looked him dead in the eyes and copied his trademark smirk and walked past him.

He stood there dumbfounded for a minute before letting out a large bellow of a laugh.

9. Chapter 7

Chapter 7

When Chizuru and Okita made it back to Okita's men they continued their patrol with no more interruptions. Towards the end of the patrol, Okita pointed out the clothing shop he had spoken of before and Chizuru ducked in. When she came out, she had three bundles in her hand and wore a brand new haori. Her new haori was a simple black with red stitching. It didn't really match, but the material was durable and warm. Okita eyeballed the other three parcels in her hands.

"What do you have in those?" He leaned over her shoulder to try and

peek at them through the paper. Chizuru snatched them away to her other arm.

"Clothes what else?" She stepped away from him and looked at him like he had grown a second head.

"I'm just curious. Remember, you are a MAN here. I don't see why you need so much clothing." He raised his eyebrows and widened his eyes when he said 'man' to emphasize his true meaning. A real man wouldn't have bought so much clothing. Chizuru sighed and shook her head.

"If you must know, I bought a black kimono for anything that must be done at night when we don't wish to be seen and a second set of the kimono I am wearing now." She huffed out her reply before continuing towards Okita's men. He trotted to catch up to her before whispering low in her ear with a devilish smirk.

"That doesn't explain the third package Chi-zu-ru." He laughed and continued towards the rest of his men when Chizuru stopped dead in her tracks. Her cheeks were dusted light pink. She clutched the parcels under her arm tighter and stomped towards Okita and the others. He was really starting to get on her nerves.

The patrol finished shortly after with their return to the Shinsengumi headquarters. Finally speaking to Okita again, Chizuru asked when the night patrol would be leaving.

"They won't leave until after dinner. I believe Saito will be preparing tonight's dinner", he answered thoughtfully. Chizuru hummed her acknowledgment and proceeded to her room. She placed her parcels in the corner and hung her haori on a peg. She let a mischievous smile grace her face when she considered her new clothing. She hadn't told Okita what the third package was, and she had no intent on ever telling them.

Chizuru was still a woman after all and there was bound to be at least some point where she could dress like one again. She had bought a soft silk light blue kimono with pink cherry blossom petals all over it. When she saw it, she just couldn't resist it. The lady in the clothing shop had sighed dreamily and asked if it was for her lover back home. She had coughed and sputtered out that it was for her sister back home.

The black kimono that she bought was form fitting and made of durable material that matched her haori. It was a midnight black with red stitching. The bottoms had a slit on each side at the top towards her waist to allow for better movement and circulation of air through the pants. The top was simple but ended with cuffed sleeves that would make combat easier. Flowing sleeves always ended up getting in the way in Chizuru's opinion. As she had told Okita, her other parcel was simply just a copy of what Saito had found her this morning.

"Speaking of Saito", she thought, "Perhaps he could use some assistance with preparing dinner?" She tapped her chin in thought but before she could do anything, a soft knock came at her door.

"You may enter", Chizuru called to towards the door. She stood up and walked towards the center of the room.

"Well, speak of the devilâ€|" she laughed to herself. Saito slid the door open and bowed to her.

"Dinner is ready." Chizuru bowed back saying thank you and followed him out the door. When they reached the dining room Shinpachi and Heisuke were already fighting over food. Chizuru could have laughed at the sight. They really seemed like a small family here.

Once again the only spot left was between Saito and Okita. Okita glanced up at her and gave her the same devilish grin he had while on patrol. She stiffened and stalked towards her seat and plopped down quite ungracefully. Before Chizuru could start eating however, Okita spun to face her and starred her down. Startled by his actions, she starred back at him. The room went quite as they watched.

"Alright Chi-zu-ru. Why don't you tell all of us a little about yourself? Including about yourâ€|episode during the patrol today." Okita was quick. It was obvious his curiosity was nagging at him all day. Not only that, but Chizuru could see a glimmer of pure dedication to the Shinsengumi in his eyesâ€|he was going to make sure that her past didn't threaten the Shinsengumi. Chizuru sighed before facing everyone in the dining room.

"My past is not something I like to talk aboutâ€|ever, but I feel that you all deserve to know." All eyes settled on Chizuru as she spoke. "When I was five, I was sent to a nearby hidden village to be trained by my master. He owed my father Kodo something and his repayment was to teach me everything he knew. Not many know of my master, but those who do are lucky. His name is Akihito Masaru."

A gasp went through at the mention of his name. Chizuru was right; not many knew of his name, but many knew of his legend. He was a great swordsman and a legendary ninja. Those who trained under him were extremely lucky and came to be great swordsman themselves.

"What kind of debt did HE owe your father?" It was Sanan who asked the question on everyone's mind.

"I have no idea. I tried for years to figure out what he could possibly owe my father, but never once did they tell me. As time progressed, I became one of his star pupils. He sent me on my first mission when I was fourteen with four other members of the village. One of the other membersâ€|was my brother."

"My twin brotherâ€|Kaoru, was sent to train under my master with me. We both progressed fast through Masaru's training together. The first mission we ever went on together was to take out a key player of one of two warring factions in our area that was causing great trouble for local villages. When we got thereâ€|.we were ambushed. My team members and I got out, but my brotherâ€|.didn't. I was told to stay outside and keep watch over our avenue of escape, but when they came backâ€|they said that Kaoruâ€|was torn apartâ€|that he was dead."

Chizuru became very quiet for a moment before she was able to continue.

"Everyone on the team didn't want to replace Kaoru, so we continued with only four members. We went on many other missions, but when I

was eighteen I was sent back to my father. It was then that my father and Master Masaru began to work on the Water of Life."

A thick silence coated the room. Dinner now completely forgotten, everyone sat digesting Chizuru's story.

"Today on the patrol, when I stepped out of a bar asking about my father, I sawâ€|.Kaoru. Iâ€|chased after him and just before I caught him Okita showed up and he ran away."

"How can it be your brother though? I thought you said he was dead?" Hijikata asked. He wore a deep thoughtful expression as he regarded her carefully.

"I thought he was too. But I KNOW my brotherâ€|I could never mistake him." Her voice was desperate, almost pleading for the same answers that the captain's wanted.

"If that is true, than that must mean that someone lied to you and something bigger is hidden beneath their deceit." Sanan spoke coolly. His glasses glinted in the low light. Chizuru's face fell as she starred at her hands.

"I do not know what they wish to cover upâ€|or why my brother wouldâ€|leave me like that." Her face fell further.

"I'm sure there is some sort of explanation Chizuruâ€|and we will help you find it!" Heisuke was desperate to cheer her back up. She glanced up at him and his hopeful face made her smile.

"Thank you Heisuke, but that is too big of a task to ask assistance for. It is my family and my masterâ€|I must do this myself."

"Nonsense. I see no reason why we cannot help you. After allâ€|this does seem to have something to do with your father Kodo as well. So I see no reason for us not to aid you. Our objectives are still the same." Kondo's voice was deep and commanding as he spoke.

Hijikata nodded his head in agreement, "But this means you must be truthful with us from now on Chizuru. You cannot hide such vital information from us again." He gave her a pointed look.

Chizuru was stunned but managed a "Yes sir". With that, dinner finally started and was eaten in a dull silence. When the meal was finished, Chizuru helped Saito with the cleaning.

"You do not have to assist me Chizuru. I am fine by myself." Saito's voice was calm and even as ever.

"It is no problem. I do not want to be a burden here, so it is the least I can do." She smiled at him for a moment before continuing to scrub at the plates. When everything was finished, they both walked outside. Chizuru however stopped and starred up at the sky. The moon was waning, but it was still bright and high in the sky.

"Is something wrong Chizuru?" Saito's voice broke her admiration of the moon and she turned to look at him fully. Saito's face was illuminated by the glow of the moon and it made him look fractionally more handsome than usual. Chizuru's heart beat picked up its pace and

her face flushed.

"Are you alright? Your face is red? Perhaps you are catching a cold?" His hand reached out and touched her forehead causing her to blush deeper.

"NO! No I'm fine! I'm just tired that's all. Goodnight Saito!" She stumbled over her words before darting around him towards her room. Just before the end of the hallway, she turned to call out his name. He turned slightly towards her showing her that he was listening.

"Thank youâ€¦Saito. For everything." He blanched at her thanks and turned to face her more but she was already gone. Saito turned to look at the moon again.

"Beautifulâ€¦"

10. Chapter 8

Chapter Eight

Chizuru leaned her head against the frame of her door in the dark.

"What in the world was that?" She thumped her head once against the wood in an attempt to stop the wanderings of her mind and the fluttering in her heart. She had never experienced something like this before. She had heard girls older than her whisper of things like loveâ€¦or mainly just handsome men in generalâ€¦but she always thought they were simply airheads. Now here she was imagining Saito's hand touching hers, his arms around her waistâ€¦

"GAH!" She growled out in frustration.

"Seriouslyâ€¦this is not rightâ€¦." She fumbled around with her katanas, picking at the hilts in frustration when an idea occurred to her.

"Maybe if I justâ€¦snuck out for a bit...?" She halted immediately and shook her head angrily.

"Noâ€¦that's wrong. I can't betray their trust." She thought for a while longer before truly becoming frustrated. Chizuru was not like some prissy little girl fussing over her appearance and handsome young men. She was a trained warrior, forged in her years of sweat, blood and tears. She gripped the hilt of her katana roughly before turning and marching out into the small courtyard outside her room. She would settle this through her katas.

The moon was still high and bright in the sky illuminating the small courtyard which would make it easy to perform her katas. She slowly pulled her sword from its sheath and tossed the blade back and forth between her hands. She would need to be quite to keep from waking the others. Slowly she danced through her katas focusing solely on her movements. Ignoring her previous thoughts became easier and easier as she kept going. Right now was time to focus on form, not speed.

When she finished she stood still in the courtyard for a moment

staring at her sword. She shifted it in her hand and moonlight glinted off the blade blinking her in the eye. She thought about the countless missions she was sent on throughout the years. She remembered one where her master sent her on a solo mission to investigate a series of house burnings out in the countryside not far from where her father lived. Some clues had led her to a man feared by the villagers.

The villagers believed that he had also killed a young girl who had been around her age at the time and possibly a few others before her, but they couldn't prove it. She had snuck into his house to look for more clues, but found body parts hung in his kitchen.

A shudder went through at remembering the sight. She had frozen from fear and anger and could only stand and gape at the gore before her eyes. She had wretched in the corner when he came through the door. She had been too busy coughing to stay quite or to hear his approach. What he did next chilled her to her core. He had a small blade in his hand and was wiping it clean on his bloody hakamas. He wore a wicked smile as he licked his lips and eyed her. As soon as he took a step towards her, she had killed him. His face...and the body parts still clung to her memory.

She looked at her sword once more. Duty had called her to kill quite a few people. Sometimes she wondered if killing them was the right answer. She still couldn't tell. Her thoughts drifted back to Saito for a moment and she shook her head violently.

"No man would ever want to be with a woman like me." a woman who has killed." She sheathed her sword and briskly turned around to return to her room only to come face to face with the man who haunted her thoughts. She froze mid-step both utterly confused and startled by his presence.

"How didn't I hear him?" Her eyes were wide with embarrassment. He cocked his head to the side before speaking.

"I am sorry if I startled you." He paused for a brief moment before continuing, "I could not sleep so I came outside for some fresh air when I saw you." His cheeks turned a slight hint of pink. Chizuru regained her composure and turned her gaze towards the ground.

"I too couldn't sleep. I had a lot on my mind." Chizuru coughed lightly and awkwardly. They stood in awkward silence, neither really looking at the other before Saito broke the silence.

"May I ask to see your blade?" Chizuru's head shot up and stared at him for a moment before slowly drawing the katana from her waist and handing it over to him. He took it carefully and slowly pulled it from its sheath. His eyes roamed over the blade in awe. Chizuru blushed darkly at her impure idea of him gazing at her that way. She turned her head to the side and coughed to hide her blush.

"It is a truly remarkable blade. From where does it originate? I see no markings of its maker?" He puzzled over the blade more closely to see if he had missed something.

"My master thought it was extremely important for us to be part of the blade making process. When Master Masaru thought us fit enough to hold a blade, he sent us to the forges to help make our own blades."

Saito eyes darted to hers and stared at her in awe, searching for any lies. He found none.

"The true masters of blade making did most of the work, but Master Masaru made sure that we were present at all times during the making of our blades. Mine was folded a hundred and one times. I weighted and made the hilt myself. The blade was all made by the master smith. That is why there are no markings. The blade is mine and mine alone." Saito gingerly re-sheathed the sword and gave it back to Chizuru.

"That is truly amazing. Thank you for allowing me to observe it." He bowed to her and when he rose again, she could see his brain working a mile a minute. She tilted her head slightly and considered him. She almost thought she could see him blushing under her gaze but she chided herself for thinking such and righted herself.

"It is late, I believe I will turn in for the night. It was a pleasure speaking with youâ€¦Saito." She bowed and began to move towards her door. As she slid it open, Saito called out her name grabbing her attention.

"Chizuruâ€¦would you mind sparring with me tomorrow?" His question caught her off guard and she raised a delicate eyebrow at him.

"Of course, you don't have to, but I am sure it would be good practice." His tone was even and straight as always, but she could almost catch a glimpse of hope in his eyes. She smiled warmly at him and nodded her head.

"I see no reason why not. It would be excellent practice." He bowed to her and thanked her. "I've been looking for a good sparring partner for years. Hopefully you can finally aid me in my search." She smirked at his taken back face and quickly slid the door closed ending the conversation.

Her heart was beating faster again and she wasn't sure if it was from excitement at her match with him tomorrow, or Saito's own smirk that he flashed at her just before she closed the door. Either wayâ€¦she was excited.

Short chapter I know! But I've been very busy! Let me know what you think though! Thanks guys!

11. Update!

Hey guys! Sorry but I've been super busy at work these past two weeks. Just yesterday I had a 24 hour shift. But never the less, I am currently working on the next chapter, and I think you guys will like it.

Remember! If you have any suggestions or just comments, I love reading them and I take all of them into consideration! Thanks for your likes and your follows and I hope you enjoy the rest of the story as it comes! Trust me, every spare moment I have is dedicated to getting another chapter out to you guys! I really hate making you wait. So bare with me and know that I'm working as hard and as fast as I can!

12. Chapter 9

Its finally here! THE NEXT CHAPTER! AGHHH! I am SO SORRY for the wait. Things got really bad here in my personal life and it literally just took the want to write right out of me. (LOL write right derp) But anyway, I just felt so guilty that so many of you really liked my story so I finally got off my sorry but and wrote the next chapter! Hope you like!

Chapter Nine

Chizuru awoke early the next morning excited for her upcoming sparring match with Saito. She expected great things from him considering what she saw the first night she met him. She thought back to that first night and how much had changed since then in just a few short days.

She sighed lightly and began braiding her hair tightly before twisting it into a bun. If the match she was about to have would be anything like she imagined, she wouldn't want her hair to be in the way. When she finished she stood and began placing her swords in her sash before a light tap came from her door.

"You may enter." Saito slid the door open and bowed before entering.

"Chizuru, I came to see if you are still willing to spar with me this morning?" His eyes slid to hers and held them. She let a small smile slip.

"Of course. I am a woman of my word." Her smile grew bigger at the sight of his own small smile.

"Shall we proceed?" He motioned towards the opened door and she nodded her agreement following him outside. Instead of the small courtyard outside her door, Saito continued down the hall towards a much larger one in the center of the compound. Other than a small cherry blossom tree in the corner, the courtyard was bare. Perfect for training and sparring. Already gathered, the rest of the Shinsengumi captain's looked up at their arrival.

"Good morning Chi-zu-ru. I hear you are going to fight the Saito this morning? You know he is a master of Iai right?" Okita leaned lazily against one of the wooden beams supporting the roof. His smirk implied that he was going to enjoy the upcoming fight.

"I did not realize everyone would be spectating this morningâ€|" Chizuru glanced towards her feet, her cheeks now slightly pink.

"I only wish to see the level of your skill Chizuru. Do not feel anxious at our presence." Hijikata's voice brought her gaze towards him and she smiled. He was trying to reassure her.

"But of course. My apologies. I hope I can come close to the Shinsengumi standard." She bowed towards Hijikata.

"I'm not gonna lie Chizuru, I am extremely excited to see this." Shinpachi's bellow made Chizuru giggle and Harada shake his head.

"Shinpachi! Stop being such a brute. You wonder why the ladies avoid you!" Harada looked to Chizuru. "Just pretend we aren't here Chizuru. I'm sure you will do great." He ruffled her bangs as he walked past her to sit next to Heisuke.

"Yeah Chizuru! This is gonna be awesome!" Chizuru giggled once more at Heisuke's eagerness.

"Shall we begin?" Saito faced Chizuru from the center of the compound. She silently turned and took her place opposite him. They both bowed to each other and to their spectators before standing straight once more.

Chizuru's blood was already racing. She had waited all night for this, and now here she was facing Saito. He stood still, left hand placed lightly on the hilt of his blade, stance relaxed. He was evaluating her.

She tensed for a moment before making herself relax again. This was a fight, and it was no time to be thinking about how handsome he looked when he regarded her with that even stare of his. Chizuru closed her eyes for a moment taking in a deep breath before slowly drawing her sword from its sheath.

The blade glinted in the light at her. Sometimes she thought the blade was almost alive, that it she belonged to the sword just as much as it belonged to her. She loved this sword and it had treated her well over the years. Her eyes turned up to Saito's again and she held his gaze.

Slowly she began ever so slightly swaying her sword. It was called the "Wagtail Sword" and her master had taught her many years ago. It was supposed to keep your opponent from being able to read when you will strike. However, Saito looked unperturbed by this and remained still.

Chizuru vaulted forward sword raised above her head ready to deliver a menacing blow, but Saito was fast. He truly was a master of Iai. Before she could recover, Saito deflected her assault easily and pushed her back almost causing her to lose her balance. Taking a step back and regaining composure she squared her stance away.

"So you are just as fast and as strong as I thought you were. I must not underestimate you," she thought to herself. Saito placed himself in an attack position before darting forward towards her. Deftly she darted to the side while bringing her sword down to try and land a blow on his back. Still he was fast and managed to dodge her attack with a block.

Jumping away from each other once more they repositioned themselves; Saito in an attack position and Chizuru on the defensive. Chizuru's blood was racing. With each clash of their swords she became more and more excited. Saito was good; very good. She had not yet met an opponent like him since her training with Master Masaru.

Saito dashed forward and Chizuru caught his blade with her own. Pushing against each other in a show of force their face became very close.

"You are exceptionally good at the sword. I am very impressed."

"You flatter my Saito, but I must say you are just as skilled if not better. However, I do not plan on losing." Chizuru smirked and he responded with a small smirk of his own. A fire lit up in his eyes that set a fire ablaze in Chizuru.

"I do no plan on losing eitherâ€|Chizuru." With that the two of them pushed each other away and began a flurry of strikes that almost couldn't be seen with the eye. It was like they were dancing with each other rather than sparring. With each clash of their blades, the eyes of the Shinsengumi captains grew wider.

They had expected Chizuru to be good, considering she had trained with one of the greatest masters they had ever heard of, but she was exceeding their expectations by a land slide. Chizuru and Saito continued their onslaught on each other before a final movement took everyone's breath away. Only the sound of Saito's and Chizuru's exertion could be heard in the courtyard.

In the middle of the courtyard, both Chizuru and Saito stood facing each other, blades poised at their opponents throat, mere centimeters away from precious life blood. They stared into each other's eyes breathing deeply from their match. A small wind swept across the courtyard and blew stray hairs in front of Chizuru's face, but she did not falter.

Slowly both of them lowered their swords. Chizuru couldn't take her eyes off Saito's. They were mesmerizing and captivating. The deep purple of his eyes said they held many secrets; Chizuru wished to know them. A small smirk appeared on Saito's face as he moved to re-sheath his sword. Chizuru followed his actions and the two of them bowed to each other and to their stunned spectators. Chizuru couldn't help the large grin that broke out upon her face.

Her blood was singing. Saito had truly given her a run for her money, and yet they still came out to a draw. That had only ever happened once before and the memory of it sent a small pang of hurt through her before she brushed the stray thought away. She turned to Saito and bowed again.

"Thank you very much! That was an amazing match. I hope we can do it again some time." Her smile was infectious and soon Saito too was smiling lightly.

"You are very skilled. It was a truly good matchâ€|thank youâ€|Chizuru." She blushed when he said her name, but soon found herself surrounded by Shinpachi, Harada and Heisuke.

"That was amazing Chizuru!" Heisuke shouted. His hands were in his hair and he wore a huge smile.

"That was definitely something their Chizuru." Harada spoke calmly and he gave her a warm smile that told her he was highly impressed. Shinpachi stood mouth agape. "Shinâ€|close your mouth would you. You look like a coy fish," Harada jested at his friend. Heisuke let out a loud laugh and clapped the abused captain on the back.

"I justâ€|. Chizuruâ€|I mean WOW!" Shinpachi shouted his astonishment to Chizuru and she couldn't help but laugh along with Harada and

Heisuke.

Hijikata and Kondo walked up to join the group as well.

"That was an impressive performance Chizuru. We are glad to have you here." Kondo's words were warm and friendly and made Chizuru's heart ache. She hadn't received such warmth and openness from someone in a long time. The Shinsengumi were truly unique.

Okita remained by the compound, but he smiled none the less. Saito walked over to join him.

"She sure is something isn't she Saito?" Okita turned his sly glance towards his comrade. Saito's face dawned a nice shade of pink before he coughed and turned his gaze away from Chizuru and towards the cherry blossom tree.

"She is very skilled, yes." Okita's smirk grew wider.

"Yes very. I can't wait to see how she will surprise us next." Saito's face was still turned away but his face became warmer.

Chizuru was laughing idly with the Shinsengumi captains when the sound of clapping turned them silent.

"Very impressiveâ€|you have improved I see." A voice spoke out almost from the wind. Everyone's gaze turned towards the edge of the compound to see a man leaning against a pole with a lazy smirk on his face. The captains of the Shinsengumi all drew their swords at once at the sight of an intruder. How had he gotten into the compound undetected?

"Kazama! How did you find me?!" Chizuru shouted in delight and ran towards the intruder. What?

13. Chapter 10

Chapter 10

Chizuru was all happiness. She ran towards Kazama and embraced him. Kazama wore a smirk on his face as he hugged the exuberant Chizuru. Everyone stood tense with swords still drawn. Kazama looked over the top of Chizuru's head and his smirk grew a fraction wider.

"My dear Yukimara, I believe you should introduce me to your friends here before they have a go at my head." Chizuru stepped back from Kazama and turned around quickly bowing to the captains of the Shinsengumi.

"My apologies! This is Chikage Kazama, an old comrade of mine." Slowly they lowered the swords, but left them out still uneasy at the presence of an intruder. Chizuru turned around to address Kazama once more.

"How did you find me? I haven't seen you in years." Chizuru regarded Kazama's face closely. He had grown since they had last seen each other. He looked more like a man now than the snotty-nosed spoiled brat she used to know. He had grown a head taller and his muscles

were leaned out across his body. His blonde hair had remained the same, just a tad bit longer now. However, the trade mark smirk she remembered still remained on his face.

"I happened to be passing by when I could have sworn I heard you. You know I can't pass up teasing you Yukimara." He leaned closer to her face. "And I might say the years have been very kind to you Chizuru."

Chizuru took a step back from Kazama and punched him lightly in the shoulder.

"Don't say such silly things. Honestly you haven't changed a bit. But seriously how did you find me. I left for a reason. How are you here now?" Chizuru was becoming wary. Kazama's comment had made her uneasy. Before, it was always him picking on her, but now his voice held a tone that implied something much deeper and it did not sit well with her.

"Yes and might I had we all wished to know why you left. Not giving a reason? That's not proper etiquette." Kazama slowly circled around Chizuru causing her to have to move to follow his movements. Something was definitely different. "I've actually been looking for you for a few months Yukimara. Your father has sent me to collect you."

Once again the captains of the Shinsengumi tensed and raised the swords to the ready. Chizuru gasped and took a few steps away from Kazama and laid her hand on the hilt of her own sword.

"What? How long have you been in contact with my father? Where is he? Why has he apparently sent you to retrieve me?" Chizuru's mind was racing. What could it all mean? Her father had been missing for months now; how in the world did Kazama find him and not herself?

"So many questions. You will find out soon enough what your father has planned for you. Master Maseru also wishes to see you." At the mention of her master's name she drew her sword and leveled it at Kazama.

"Now you speak blasphemy. Where are they? How did you find me and what exactly do you want with me." If Kazama was concerned, he did not show it. He merely grinned and crossed his arms over his chest.

"It's been years little Yukimara. You are no longer my squad leader and we are no longer children. You will need to recognize your true place." Chizuru growled low before spitting out her anger.

"Master Maseru made me the squad leader for a reason. You KNOW I was next in line to take over. Do not presume to mock me Kazama." Chizuru glared daggers at Kazama. Finally, Kazama's face distorted into a frown.

"You will do well to listen little Chizuru. You will come with me or so help me I will drag you kicking and screaming." He made a movement towards Chizuru but stopped at the sight of the Shinsengumi captains coming to stand around her.

"I see you found some mangy wolves to protect you. Do you really think they will keep you from me? I'll barely even notice they were here after I am done with them. Are you going to come freely Chizuru? Or will I have to make you?" Kazama glared at them one at a time before turning his eyes back to Chizuru.

"It's time you left Kazama." Chizuru's grip on her sword tightened. She had not imagined the morning that she would have to fight an old comrade, let alone see one.

"Very well. There shall be no fighting today little Chizuru, but I will return and I will take you with me when do come back." With that Kazama disappeared in a mirage stunning everyone. There was a moment of silence before all eyes turned once more to Chizuru. She cursed quietly and sheathed her sword.

"I apologize. That wasâ€|unexpected." Her gaze fell to the ground as she bowed deeply. "I believe I will soon need to take my leave before I cause any more trouble." She felt a pang in her heart. Once again she would need to leave a place where she was beginning to feel at home in. He chuckled in her head thinking on how it had only been a few days.

"Nonsense. We are simplyâ€|curious Chizuru. Our goal is still the same. We can help you Chizuru." It was Kondo who spoke. Her head shot up to look him in the eyes. He was standing before her, arms crossed but eyes tender.

"I could not imposeâ€|", Hijikata cut her off.

"It would not impose on us. Nothing changes between us even though circumstances have changed. I do think that we should hear a little more about you now however." Hijikata placed a level gaze at her and her eyes went to the ground once more.

"Of course. There is much to be told." Kondo clapped his hands at this before speaking.

"Very well. Then we shall discuss this after breakfast. I'm starved and I am sure you and Saito are too. Let us eat first." Without waiting for a reply he briskly turned and walked towards the dining hall followed by Inoue who had been standing towards the side with Yamazaki and Shimada. She hadn't noticed them before now. They truly were silent.

Heisuke came up next to Chizuru and spoke softly, "Chizuruâ€|don't worry. Hijikata may look like a demon but he's a real softy on the inside. We like you. We aren't going to abandon you. Promise." He ended with a smile that Chizuru returned softly. Slowly the rest of the captains and Chizuru made it to the dining room to find that Yamazaki and Shimada had already prepared breakfast. At the sight of the food, Chizuru's stomach growled loudly causing Shinpachi and Harada to laugh heartily.

Breakfast passed quietly enough. Only two fights broke out between Heisuke and Shinpachi over food. It was actually very comical. While Heisuke wasn't looking Shinpachi stole a piece of his meat and swallowed it whole. Chizuru was sure he didn't even chew. When Heisuke turned back to find part of his meal missing, he eyed Shinpachi who couldn't help but break out into an idiot grin. A brief

flurry of slaps and hisses was all that passed before the settled down again.

As revenge, Heisuke stole a slice of Shinpachi's meat which erupted into a large noogie and another brief flurry of slaps and hisses before Hijikata cleared his throat and thoroughly ended the slap fest. Chizuru had almost choked on some rice trying not to laugh out loud.

When breakfast was cleared, all eyes turned to Chizuru as they waited patiently for an explanation. Clearing her throat she began telling her story once more.

"When I was under Master Maseru's household, we worked as contractors of sorts. Whoever could pay received our help. Even those who could not pay in money were often given options for payment in other ways such as assistance in future missions in the area. Master Maseru had us split into squads of five. My squad consisted of Chikage Kazama, the man you met earlier, Kyo Shiranui, Kyuju Amagiri, my brother Kaoru. Each of us possessed a particular skill they we excelled in." Chizuru glanced at everyone in the room making sure everyone was still following.

"Kazama's particular skill is with the sword, Shiranui's is western weapons particularly the pistol, Amagiri with his fists and my brother with disguises."

"What is your skill?" Hijikata's question made everyone turn to look at him then back to Chizuru for her answer.

"I don't necessarily have one particular skill. I possess a few which is why Maseru made me their squad leader. I am good with the sword, shuriken and concealment. Yamazaki, I believe you and I have a little in common." Yamazaki gave a small smile and inclined his head slightly acknowledging her statement.

"But what set me apart from everyone else was my ability to lead. I have never thought myself as a good leader, but Maseru did. While we were a squad, life back stories was never something any of us needed to know. Working under Maseru made us comrades but personal lives were still personal. I don't know much about Kazama or the others, just my brother really."

However, after my brother diedâ€|I decided it was time that I went home for a while. I didn't want to continue without my brother. It was too hard. His death took a toll on everyone. But nowâ€|I'm not so sure what is going on anymore. After seeing himâ€|or at least someone who looks very much like him in town yesterdayâ€|and now meeting Kazama out of the blue when I was sure that no one would be able to trace me after I left looking for my fatherâ€|I feel like something more sinister is afoot here."

Chizuru trailed off into her own thoughts as did the others. After a long silence Hijikata broke it with a cough to gain everyone's attention.

"Chizuru if you will let us help you, we will. I see no reason why we should not considering that we still share the same goal."

Kondo nodded his head in agreement, "Yes I agree Toshi. Chizuru if

you would like you may still accompany the patrols as well. If there is anything you need, please don't hesitate to ask. We will do what we can." Kondo's smile warmed her heart once more.

"Thank you very much." She bowed until her forehead touched the ground.

"Alright, now that that is settledâ€| Harada, Shinpachi. I believe you have the day patrol yes?" Hijikata glanced at the two questioned.

"Yes, yes we do. Chizuru, would you like to accompany us?" Harada turned to Chizuru and questioned her with his ever present smile.

"Of course. I will meet you by the gate when you are ready." Chizuru smiled back and proceeded to go to her room. Once there, she re-tied her hair so that it was in a high ponytail once more and readjusted her clothing and her swords at her side. When she went outside, she paused for a brief moment to consider the small courtyard outside her room.

She had come a long way in just a few days and things were only getting more complicated. How could so much happen in just a few days. She thought back to when her brother died and remembered feeling the same thing back then.

She shook her head and started towards the main gate to the compound once more. She would have to get to the bottom of this and put an end to it. If she didn't...she could only fear the worst.

14. Chapter 11

Chapter Eleven

As Chizuru approached the front gate, Harada was already waiting. His men assembled behind him and gave her a curt nod. Obviously she still had some fitting in to do.

"Shinpachi already left on patrol. He will be taking the North East sector. I hope you don't mind accompanying me?" Harada asked her with a small smile on her face.

Chizuru bowed her head, "But of course. I thank you for allowing me to accompany you at all."

"Nonsense. It would be my pleasure." Harada signaled to his men and their patrol began. It remained quite peaceful with some small chit chat now and then between a few of the men until one of assumedly Shinpachi's men ran up to the patrol.

"Sir! There is a disturbance near Shimbaras! I fear that we will be overrun. Please sir!" Quite frantic and out of breath the man bowed quickly.

"Lead the way. Quickly! Go!" Harada mumbled under his breath, "what exactly did you do now Shinâ€|"

Chizuru quickly followed the now running patrol to Shimbaras. The

sight that greeted her however left her baffled. Quite frankly the sight before her was hilariously. Shinpachi was covered in head to toe in what appeared to by sake and his men where in an all-out brawl. Tucked under one arm was a head and in the other geisha fan. He repeatedly used the geisha fan to smack the man on the head.

"Shinpachi!? What in the world is going on?" Harada yelled at Shinpachi while pulling the unknown man's abused head from Shinpachi's vice grip.

"This fool and his brutes started it!" Shinpachi grabbed yet another man from the brawl and proceeded to whack him alongside the head the fan.

"Enough Shin! This is ridiculous. You look more like brutes yourself!" With that final yell Shinpachi and his men came to a slow stand still as they surveyed themselves.

With a large, gleeful laugh Shinpachi scratched his head and said, "I suppose you are right, but I just can't help myself. He insulted the Shinsengumi and then threw his sake on me, which is a complete waste, and you just know how I can't help myself when it comes to a good fight." Chizuru had to cover her mouth to stop from laughing.

"You are a complete idiot Shinpachi. Go complete the rest of your rounds. You can't take everything people say about us so seriously." Harada shook his head and signaled for his men to leave. Chizuru jogged up next to him.

"What exactly do people say about the Shinsengumi, Harda-san?" She leaned forward to glance at his face.

Harada hesitated for a moment before speaking. "Not everyone thinks we are great people. Some actually think that we should be here at all. But Hijikata and Kondo's mission is not wrong! I swear it. We fight for justice and want to keep the peace. But things are changing."

With that Harada grew silent once more. Chizuru figured she must have hit a sensitive subject so she fell back and remained silent for the remainder of the patrol. She did not know him well, but she could tell that this bothered Harada greatly.

"He is a good man. People saying such things must really bring him down", she thought to herself. The rest of the patrol continued in silence.

Chizuru was deep in thought when she noticed someone duck away from her gaze when she looked towards a shop front. Curious she walked towards the shop.

"Herbal Remedies!", she murmured. To the right of the shop in the small alley way she heard a noise that grabbed her attention. As she quickly looked towards the noise she saw someone duck behind a barrel.

"Hey! Come on out already. I know you are there!" She leaned to her right and yelled down the alley. Slowly with her hand on her sword she crept forward. Whoever it was obviously thought she was an idiot.

Quickly she jumped around the barrel and drew her katana to her opponents throat.

"What in theâ€|!?" Chizuru gasped in surprise at finding a child at the end of her blade. At that moment Harada called down the alley, "Oi Yukimara-san what are you doing?" At that moment the child leapt up and made a run for Harada in hopes of breaking past.

"Hey!" Chizuru shouted at the child. But before he could escape Harada grabbed the boy by his scruff and held him up.

"I didn't think you would be one to pull a blade on a child Chizuru." Harada still wore his trade mark smile but she could see the surprise in his eyes.

"I would neverâ€| I didn't know. They hid from meâ€| I never saw their face. Why are you spying on me little one?" she asked as she walked up to the child suspended in the air.

The child squirmed in Harada's grip, "Let me go! I just wanted to see your face!" They kicked a few more times before Harada chuckled.

"I can assure you that you won't escape his grip. So calm down and maybe we will set you down. Now tell us, who are you and why do you want to see my face so badly?" Chizuru sheathed her katana and placed her fists on her hips. She cocked her head to the side and gave the child a stern look.

"Alright fine! Just put me downâ€|.please." The child huffed and crossed their arms over their chest. With a silent chuckle Harada placed the child back on their own two feet.

"And you should explain why a girl would dress as a servant boyâ€|", Chizuru let the sentence die off as the child's head shot up in surprise.

"You can tell I'm a girl?" Chizuru giggled and squatted down to be eye level with the child.

"Of course I can, after all, you must be able to tell I am a girl too neh?" She winked at the girl and she blushed furiously. Hanging her head she scuffed the ground with her foot.

"Iâ€|I just wanted to make sure that you were a girl. The others said I was crazy but I could tell!" the little girls head shot up once more but this time in childlike pride.

"Who? What others?" Harada questioned. The girl looked over her shoulder and grew scared.

"It's okay to tell us. You won't be harmed. I promise. You have my word as a womanâ€|", the child glanced at Chizuru still unsure, "and as a warrior." That perked the child's ear.

A few more moments of silence passed between the trio as the child contemplated telling them before finally the child spoke, "They are looking for you. They told us kids to look for you. Told us what you would look like. But they described you as a girl, not a cross dresserâ€|" The child trailed off at Harada's chuckle. But Chizuru had grown worried at the child's tale.

"Who exactly told you to look for me?" She stared at the little girl intently in the eyes. She could detect no dishonesty in the child's eyes.

"They never gave us their namesâ€¦but they said if we found youâ€¦to tell them at once."

"How are you supposed to tell them if you don't know who they are?" Harada asked gently from behind. Seeing the look in Chizuru's eyes, he could tell that this concerned her greatly.

"They said they meet and Shimbaras every night. But my mom said never to go near there."

"And your mother is right. You should stay away from there." Harada gently confirmed the mother's command.

"But I don't want anyone to get hurt!", the little girl shouted. Chizuru placed her hand on the girl's shoulder.

"And I promise no one will. Tell me what they look like. You don't have to worry anymore."

After a brief pause the girl spoke once more. "The tall one is really mean looking. He talks like he is the emperor or something. But the short bald one was the one who told us what you look like", she tapped her chin thoughtfully. Now this scared Chizuru. Immediately an image of her father burst into her mind. Could he be sending people to find her? Was she bringing more harm to those around her now?

Gently she ruffled the child's hair before saying, "Thank you little one. Go home and tell your friends to pretend to keep looking for me, but don't say anything to the men who confronted you. And stay away from Shimbaras." Chizuru stared at the child intently.

"But how will I convince them it was really you?" she pleaded. Chizuru tapped her chin in thought before an idea came to her. Reaching into her sash she pulled out a small ninja star and handed it to the little girl.

"Now this is a real ninja star. You can't get these anywhere here in the city. This should convince them. It's extremely sharp too so don't cut yourself on it okay?" The girl's eyes glistened in wonderment as she gingerly took the star from Chizuru.

"Okay! I promise!" and with that the little girl zipped around Harada and disappeared into the street. Chizuru stood once more and stepped towards the edge of the alley and surveyed the street.

"So people are looking for you too now?" Harada spoke his question softly as he came to stand next to her.

"Apparently. And whoever it isâ€¦knows I have a soft spot for childrenâ€¦." Chizuru's sentence died off as both she and Harada continued to survey the street in the dying daylight. Silently the two started off back towards the Shinsengumi headquarters with the patrol. Chizuru had a lot to think aboutâ€¦and a lot to plan.

15. Chapter 12

Chapter Twelve

Chizuru sat in the courtyard outside her room meditating. Dinner was being prepared and Heisuke and Shinpachi swore up and down that they did not require her assistance. Chizuru welcomed the free time however; she had a lot to think about. The breeze blew her ponytail about and ruffled some of her bangs bringing them in front of her eyes.

"A child. For heaven's sake it was a child. And she said there were others!" Though she looked calm, Chizuru was shouting in her head.

"A child should never be brought into a fight, let alone war. Who is looking for me? Could it really be my father? But Kazama knows just as well how children sit in my mind!" Her thoughts were becoming more and more tangled the longer she dwelled on the subject.

She didn't think Amagiri nor Shiranui would do such a thing. In fact, despite his gruff manner Amagiri had almost as large a soft spot for children as she did. Shiranui on the other hand found them quite bothersome most of the time, but not so much as to wish harm to 'any little brat' as she knew he would say if he were here.

Kazama however, was a different story. He despised children. He found them noisy and messy and couldn't stand one in his presence for more than a minute. She remembered him saying once that 'children should be seen, but never heard'. She thought back to the idea of when they grew up together on the compound under Master Maseru and shuddered internally. He was a nasty child. And despite however many countless times he had asked her to become his wife and bare his children, she couldn't imagine him as a father at all.

A soft padding against the deck grabbed Chizuru's attention. She opened her eyes and looked to her right to see Saito walking towards her. He wore his deep, thoughtful expression but his eyes seemed more concerned than usual.

"I apologize if I interrupted you. I can leave if you wish", Saito's voice was as calm and as even as ever. He bowed his head slightly to her.

"No of course not. I was merely enjoying the day. Please feel free to stay", she patted the deck next to her. A brief emotion flicked across his face but it was gone before she could read it. With gentle ease he sat down next to her yet farther away than needed she noted.

"Pardon my intrusion, but it seems you were more than enjoying the day Miss Yukimara, but it seemed you were in rather troubling thought!" Saito spared a glance at her. Chizuru raised an eyebrow at him call her by her last name, "Chizuru." She smiled at his correction and starred down at her feet.

He was sweeter than she expected. To think he could be after she nearly killed him her first 'night' here.

"You seem to be able to read me very well Saito-san", she glanced sideways at him and saw a faint blush adorn his cheeks.

"I do not mean to pry, I apologizeâ€|" he made a move to get up and Chizuru's hand shot out to stop him. A look of surprise faintly crossed his face before it went back to his normal expression. Chizuru quickly withdrew her hand before saying, "I do not mean that in a bad way. I have just never met anyone who has so quickly and easily read me before. It isâ€|quite refreshing." Her attention once again diverted to her feet. What was it about him that so easily flustered her? Sen would have been furious to see her so shell shocked by a man's presence.

Sen had been one of the youngest teachers in Master Maseru's dojo. She taught both men and females the art of disguise as well as political etiquette and for femalesâ€|the art of seduction. To be honest Chizuru wasn't the BEST at seduction, but she could hold her own in a fair fight.

Chizuru internally smacked herself at calling seduction and flirtation a fight. Sen really would be mad. She always got furious at Yukimara for never realizing her 'potential and true beauty'. But that wasn't something Chizuru could really help. She had been raised to be a doctor's nurse in her younger years, with no mother to help her into woman hood and then Master Maseru had trained her to be a fighter, not a lover.

An almost awkward silence had fallen over the pair. Chizuru sparred Saito a glance through her eyelashes. He was staring out over the small courtyard seemingly at peace with himself and his surroundings. But the way he was tilted slightly away from her and the occasional fidget of his left hand, she could tell he was not all that comfortable. Did she make himâ€|nervous? I wicked thought popped into her head and she almost giggled out loud at the absurdness of the idea.

Changing her view back to that in front of her she sat up straighter and arched her back into a large stretch and a small fake yawn. She tilted her head backwards until she would have been staring almost at the wall behind her and let out a small little sound that could almost be mistaken for a sort of little moan. When she recovered from her little show she quickly darted her eyes to survey Saito's face. And the sight she found actually made her laugh out loud.

He was blushing like mad! Saito was actually blushing! So that meant he was watching her? Did he like what he saw or is he merely that awkward and embarrassed around females? Saito's face turned redder at her laugh.

He kept his eyes glued to courtyard before asking, "What seems to amuse you?" He fidgeted slightly under her gaze.

"I was just thinking of my plan when an even crazier thought occurred to me." The oddness of her statement brought his intense gaze to her face.

"Wowâ€|.his eyesâ€|" she blushed faintly at the stray thought. His eyes were rather intense. His eyes sucked her in and she couldn't possibly look away from the deep blue of his eyes. It was striking how intense yet relaxed is eyes could look at the same time.

"What idea would that be?" Chizuru? His question fluctuated at the end and that helped bring her back.

"On today's patrol with Harada-san, I was able to gather some information. It appears that someone, or a few someone's actually are looking for me." Saito's eyebrow perked up in interest but he said nothing. "From what the child said, they meet at Shimbara's and I was making a plan to go and greet them." She now had Saito's undivided attention.

"A child? Shimbara's?"

"Yes, whoever these people are they are using children to locate me. So one, they know I am in the city and two, they also know I have a soft spot for children. Do you know where and what Shimbara's is?" She tilted her head slightly as she continued to gaze at him.

With a faint blush Saito replied, "It is in the red light distract. It is a geisha house." Chizuru's eyes widened a fraction at his statement.

"Well then! this should be easier than I thought." She smiled wickedly and Saito's blush came back again faintly.

"I do not know what you mean!" his sentence trailed off as Chizuru rose to her feet. Getting up himself he stared down into her eyes as she smiled cheerfully.

"I will tell you and everyone else at dinner if all of you are as eager as you all say you are." With that she started off towards the dining room where a small ruckus could already be heard. Silently Saito fell into step next to her. As they walked his hand brushed hers. They both blushed and looked the opposite direction of the other. But ever so faintly, Saito could feel her move just a little bit closer to him as they walked towards the dining room. His smile was brief, but short lived as a blob of rice shot out the door and smacked him in the face. Chizuru had ducked just in time but could not warn the stoic warrior fast enough.

His face became blank as he turned fully towards the open door to find Shinpachi and Heisuke standing tangled together with a spoon extended in the air above them. A smile giggle escaped Chizuru but when his eyes darted to her face she stood stoic and unreadable.

"I hope that not all of the food is spoiled..." was all he said as he stalked towards the guilty pair.

*AAAAAAANNNND CUT! I noticed I didn't have too many funny parts so I had to add a little humor. I hope you guys are liking this so far! I'm sorry it has taken me so long to update, but I was just too busy with work and school and personal stuff. BUT anyway! let me know what you guys think! And thank you to everyone who first started reading my story so long ago and sticking around anyway despite my long absence. YOU GUYS ARE THE BEST!

After dinner was cleaned up and put away, the rice throwing incident almost completely forgotten, Chizuru sat in the middle of the room to address not only Kondo-san, Hijikata-san and Sanan-san, but all the captains of the Shinsengumi. When everyone settled down, Chizuru bowed her head to floor.

"Please, there is no need to act so formal!" Kondo-san almost seemed disturbed by Chizuru's low bow.

"Honestly, there is no need Yukimara" Hijikata's gentle voice moved Chizuru's insides. It reminded her of Master Maseru. He could have the same gentle voice sometimes.

"I come before all of you tonight to ask for your help", Chizuru glanced around the room making brief eye contact with each captain minus Heisuke. He had to go on patrol after dinner. When her eyes reached Okita's he winked at her causing her to blush slightly. Her eyes landed next on Saito. He looked stern as ever but his eyebrow twitched. "Perhaps he caught Okita flirting?" she thought to herself.

Turning back to Kondo-san and Hijikata, she took a deep breath before speaking again. "This afternoon on patrol with Harada-san, I learned some distressing news that I cannot let slide by. Someone knows I am in the city and has commissioned children to find me." Finally saying it she let the air in her lungs out fully.

A cold look dawned on Kondo-san's face. "Children? How do you know this?" Slowly Chizuru retold the events from her encounter with the little girl and Harada added a few details here and there to help her along. As she told them more, each captain became slowly sterner. She could almost feel them itching for a fight.

"So whoever these people are, they know you love children and are using that to exploit you", Hijikata spoke.

"To draw her out more precisely", Sanan spoke up. His glasses glinted in the low light. "They wish to draw you out. And judging by your earnest expression I can only imagine that they will succeed." Sanan's eyes bore deep into Chizuru's.

"I have a plan." Chizuru took a deep breath, "but I will need your help. And that is why I am before you tonight."

"What exactly is your plan little one?" Shinpachi spoke from her right side. She turned to look at him and saw that both he and Harda wore warm expressions. "Bringing children into the mix is cowardly. Honestly, I think we should find the bastards and make them pay!" Shinpachi's bellow melted Chizuru's inside a little more.

Harada's kind voice drew her attention. "What I think Shin is trying to say is that we will hear you out and will help you out as best we can." Shin grinned at Harada and then to Chizuru. She let her own smile surface to meet his.

"These men are truly something else. Not at all like the rumors she had heard back home", she thought to herself. Turning back to the front, Chizuru began to lay out the ground work for her plan.

After a few moments, Chizuru finished. "I can assume you wish to do this tonight?" Sanan questioned.

"Yes, if at all possible. I do not wish to let this go by for long without taking action." Chizuru's eyes bore into Hijikata's. He seemed highly thoughtful. Kondo-san too looked uneasy with her plan but she knew that they knew it was the only one they could use right now.

Sanan coughed and shifted slightly before speaking, "I must agree with Yukimara. Right now, with the lives of children and apparently their families on the line, we cannot just let this go unnoticed. If we can rely on the idea that the girl did not go back and tell these people looking for you that she found you, we have the element of surprise. Your plan could actually work."

Hijikata glanced between Kondo-san and Sanan. "Do you really think it will work Toshi?" Kondo-san asked. Hijikata's face was stern and thoughtful for a moment before he answered.

"I do think her plan is good. I don't like it but Sanan-san even agrees that it could work." Kondo-san coughed lightly and turned to face his men.

"What do you think?" He addressed the captains. Each captain nodded their heads in approval.

"If I get to see a little action to night I could agree", spoke Okita. Hijikata fixed him with a glare.

"Okita, you cannot go in there looking for a fight." Okita raised his hands in defense.

"I know, I know. I wouldn't go looking for oneâ€¢but I won't pass one up either."

"Souji!" Kondo-san's voice sounded gruff. Okita crossed his arms in defeat. Saito remained silent when Hijikata finally addressed him.

"Saito. Can I count on you?" Saito raised his eyes to meet Chizuru's briefly before turning to face Hijikata fully.

"Yes." Chizuru's stomach did a flip and her heart fluttered. "What was that?" she thought.

"Then so be it. You all know where you need to be. Heisuke should be returning from his patrol soon. Shinpachi and Harada can fill him in. Once you give the word Chizuru, we will move into position", Harada spoke sharply. It was easy to see why Kondo-san trusted him to be his second in command and why the men called him 'The demon'.

Chizuru bowed again. "Hai. I will go and prepare. Please be in your places in 20 minutes." With that everyone stood and exited the room.

When Chizuru reached her room she began to gracefully move about preparing herself. "Maybe I should have said 30 minutesâ€¢." She thought idly as she began to put herself together. Her plan was simple really. She would infiltrate Shimbara's posing as a geisha. If

things got out of hand, Saito would come in and be her escort out. Till then, he was to remain hidden in a back room. Hijikata said he knew a woman who worked there and said she would be willing to help out in any way possible.

Quickly she placed everything she needed into a bag and exited her room. Outside, Saito was already waiting. Wordlessly they nodded to each other and proceeded to the main gate. There she found Hijikata already waiting.

"Please have everyone leave here in 10 minutes. I must go ahead to prepare."

Hijikata nodded but before letting her pass he spoke softly, "Do not get yourself hurt. Saito, I'm trusting you." Chizuru blushed. It was as if she had been here for months, let alone just a few days. A week perhaps now. It was amazing how they were taking her in so quickly. She felt humbled.

"Thank you", was all she could say before leaving the compound. Saito's pace was brisk. If she wasn't already so nimble, she could see herself stumbling and clamoring behind him just to keep up. Just a few minutes later they had arrived at Shimbara's, but instead of going in through the front courtyard, they went through a back service entrance. Saito signaled for her to wait outside while he ducked in through the flap.

Moments later he reappeared in the company of a beautiful woman. Chizuru's face flushed with momentary jealousy. No one could deny the woman was strikingly beautiful. Her face was that of a porcelain doll and everything about her was elegant and impeccable. It was hard to think that such a beautiful woman would be here.

"I am Kimigiku. Saito-san has told me everything. Please, follow me", she bowed slightly and turned back inside. Quickly throwing a glance over her shoulder at Saito she followed. The woman was fast and Chizuru almost lost her once in a corridor, but finally they arrived at a dressing room.

Bowing at the door she spoke again. "Please allow me to help you prepare. It will help things go faster."

Chizuru bowed in return, "Thank you. Thank you so much for helping me." Quickly the two went inside and Chizuru began to undress. With practiced skill and grace Kimigiku quickly began to dress Chizuru. She was amazed at the speed with which she operated. It was unheard of to work so quickly putting on a kimono. What seemed like only minutes later she began to undo Chizuru's ponytail.

"Can you do your make up?" Kimigiku asked from atop her head. Chizuru blushed hard which elicited a giggle from the beautiful woman. "Do not worry, I will help you with that too."

"Iâ€œ|I can do the basicsâ€œ|if that helps?" Chizuru's meek voice made the woman smile warmly at her through the mirror.

"You are precious child. Please never lose that." Kimigiku place her hands on Chizuru's shoulders and squeezed lightly. Chizuru blushed once more and smiled back at her. "Where were all these kind people when I was growing up? If I had met any one of themâ€œ|.maybe things

would be differentâ€|" Chizuru quietly thought.

After about ten minutes, Kimigiku stepped back to observe her work. "Perfect. Just perfect. You look absolutely beautiful." Chizuru turned to look at herself in the mirror and was stunned for a moment. She had never seen herself like this. She still thought she looked like a child, but whatever it was that Kimigiku did, she looked almost like a woman. She only knew one other person who was ever able to do that.

"Sen would be so proudâ€|.", Chizuru spoke softly. Kimigiku walked around Chizuru to stand in front of her.

"Did you say Sen?" Kimigiku's eyes explored Chizuru's. "You know Sen?" Chizuru almost gawked. She had said that outloud? "How do you know Sen? There are very few who know her name." Kimigiku's eyes began to scan Chizuru's face.

"I doâ€|know Sen. But how do you?" Chizuru inquired. It's not every day that you meet people who know the same people you know from a very hidden very mysterious ninja clan. Kimigiku took a deep breath.

"I noticed your body was defined but I took that into account that you were a farmer's daughter. And I only assumed that the Shinsengumi were using you to get information. But to thinkâ€|", her voice trailed off. "Now is not the time. If you are a friend of Sen's then you are a definite friend of mine. We will speak more later." Kimigiku's next action surprised Chizuru greatly. Kimigiku, this beautiful woman who apparently has some sort of contact with Sen, a master in a hidden ninja clan, bowed deeply and respectfully to Chizuru.

Gaining her senses back, Chizuru quickly returned her bow with a deep one of her own. When they both stood tall again, Kimigiku turned Chizuru towards the door and gave her a little push. "She reminds me of Sen a lot nowâ€|.", Chizuru thought to herself. Opening the door and stepping out into the chill air, she came face to face with Saito.

***AAAAANNNNNNNNNNNDDDDDD CLIFFY! BUWAHAHAHAHAHA! I'll get the next chapter out as soon as I can I swear! I hope you like it! Thank you again for all of your comments and for following or even just liking my story at all! You have no idea how happy it makes me! ^_^ Anyways, life is kind of up and down with how busy I get so please bear with me! My amazing awesome boyfriend also says hi! And wants me to say something along the lines of "how amazing he is" and "how his jaw is chiseled out of stone" or something like that. LOL Hope you guys like it and keep your comments rolling in! I love them and I love you guys!

17. Chapter 14

Chapter Fourteen

Saito coughed lightly at coming face to face with Chizuru. "Hello Saito-san", Chizuru inclined her head in greeting.

"Um yes hello. I'm looking for Yukimara-san. Have you seen her?"

Saito inclined his head in return. Chizuru tilted her head slightly to the side.

"Saitoâ€|its me." Chizuru's eyes searched Saito's face. His face turned a light shade of pink as he took her in from head to toe.

"Chi-Chizuru? I did notâ€|.recognize you. You lookâ€|veryâ€|" Saito fell silent as he stumbled over his words. Chizuru covered her giggle with her hand.

"Do I look so different Saito?", as she giggled again Kimigiku appeared behind her.

"There will be much time later for pleasantries Yukimaraâ€|Saito," her eyebrow raised in interest upon seeing Saito's face. Chizuru quickly regained her composure.

"Yes of course. Is everything set?" Her eyes became stern and focused on Saito. This had to run smoothly. She did not want anything to happen to the children involved in this nor any innocent who may be involved without their knowing.

Saito coughed lightly before speaking. "Yes. Yamazaki is hidden well and will be ready at any point should a need for his services arise. The others are at their posts. We are ready when you are." Chizuru took a deep breath. She wasn't good at this. She had a tendency of being a brute. But tonight called for a soft feminine touch. She had to do what was necessary. Saito must have picked up on her discomfort because his hand raised as if to touch her shoulder but he hesitated before dropping his hand back at his side.

Instead he spoke, "Are you sure about thisâ€|Chizuru?" Chiruzu lifted her gaze to meet his deep eyes. "I can't afford not to be." With that she bowed slightly before following Kimigiku into the dark corridor. Saito stared after her for a long moment before moving himself into position.

Outside the main room, Kimigiku turned to face Chizuru. "Remember everything Sen has taught you and this should run smoothly." She smiled down at the petite girl.

Chizuru took a deep breath, "I wasn't her best student thoughâ€|at all." She gave a wry smile. Kimigiku chuckled softly. "Nonsense. You are a beauty. They will be all over you. Just remember not to get carried away." With that Kimigiku gave Chizuru a wink and opened the main door.

It was all hustle and bustle and noise in the giant dining room. Men were sprawled about everywhere drinking and eating themselves silly. Girls accompanied them in their roar of laughter and tales of great courage and gallantry. Chizuru was taken aback for a moment. Despite spending a lot of time around men, she was accustomed to a tamer crowd than that of this ravel. Kimigiku took Chizuru's elbow and guided her towards the other side of the room towards a rather robust man drinking sake by himself.

Leaning in towards Chizuru's ear she whispered, "This is the group's leader of sorts. If you can get any information it will be from him." Chizuru gave a small nod.

"Good evening sir", Kimigiku bowed. "I see you are in need of company. Please allow this new young lady to accompany you." Chizuru bowed in greeting. As he looked up his eyes were immediately drawn to Chizuru. His face turned a slight shade brighter at the sight of her. He shuffled over and patted the pillow next to him.

"Of course!" Chizuru swallowed the bile that rose in throat. She could see nothing but lust in his eyes. This was already going to be a long night. As she took a seat next to him she blanked at what to do. Almost wildly she glanced around looking for anything to keep his attention. Spotting a sake bottle she quickly picked it up and smiled up at him. "Sir, could I pour you some more sake?"

His laugh bellowed out and shook her insides. "Of course! You should drink some too!" He clumsily picked up his sake cup and thrust it at her. Carefully she poured the sake. It was more difficult however due to his slight sway. He was already stone cold drunk. Chizuru groaned internally.

"Please tell me about yourself sir." Chizuru bowed her head. She was hoping she look submissive, but she was also trying to dodge his lustful glances. "Are you a warrior sir?" She dared to glance up at him through her eyelashes. 'Please let this be good.', she thought.

It worked like a charm. The man blushed and gave a mighty war cry. "Of course I am! I am the leader of the Satsuma!" Chizuru had to hold herself together. 'Must he be so loud?' she internally groaned again.

"The leader? You must be so important then sir." She faked a look of awe at him. Further stroking his ego she innocently placed a hand on his thigh. The man let out a cough. After recovering he spoke more and more of his robust tales of war and blood. Chizuru was almost sick of listening to him when finally he spoke of something that caught her attention.

"I just don't think those brats could really help us at all though. It's all really stupid. MEN should be the ones to do all the fighting!" He slammed his sake cup on the table. Shouts from a few other men accompanied his outburst. Chizuru refilled his sake cup. "Children you say sir? Why children?" she asked.

Bleary eyed his gaze began to bear down on her. "Why do you ask girly? It is of no concern to you!" Chizuru began to panic. He was not as drunk as he seemed. He was suspicious of her now. "Um I only mean why send children? A man like you would be much more capable. A child is not as strong or as brave as you?" She let her words die off as her eyes darted around the room.

He grabbed her arm roughly and pulled her closer. "You shouldn't ask so many questions girly. Or any at all, or else the Satsuma and the Chosu will become angry! But, for such a beauty like yourself, I think they could make an exception. Become my wife!" Chizuru's face paled.

"Um I can not I am already..engaged!" Chizuru struggled against his grip.

"Ohhh! So you wish to play hard to get! I can play that game!" Chizuru broke free as he downed another cup of sake.

"The glass! It is empty. Allow me to get you more!" Quickly she jumped to her feet and grabbed the sake bottle and hurried out of the main room. Once outside, she leaned against the wall and held her chest. She thought her heart might pound out of it at any moment. Before she could catch her breath the Satsuma man and two of his goonies opened the door. Quickly she turned and started down the hallway. The platform shoes and the dress however limited her speed and mobility.

"There you are! So you want to play cat and *hiccup* mouse eh?" The three stumbled after her. Seeing a hallway on her right she quickly darted down the hall. Two more lefts and she found herself at a dead end. 'Crap! I should have looked at the layout of this place!' she screamed in her head. She ducked into a small room to her left. It was dark and bare but maybe they would be too drunk to figure out where she went. Grunts and cat calls could be heard throughout the compound. It definitely sounded like more than three men were looking for her now.

'This is getting out of hand!' Chizuru was becoming more and more nervous. Suddenly the door swung open. Illuminated only by the light behind him, she could tell who it was. He was smaller than the three chasing her before, but he could be another one sent after her. He took three long strides into the room towards her. Still unable to see his face and at a loss for what to do, Chizuru pulled the fabric around her legs up and swept her legs out to catch her assailant's feet and knock him to the ground.

Caught off guard by her sudden attack, the man fell to the ground. However, he was quick and hastily jumped back to his feet. Chizuru charged at him though and caught him off balance again. The two tumbled to the ground. She landed on top though and pinned him to the ground with one leg on each side of him. She cocked back her fist but his hands flew up and caught her wrist.

"Chizuru! Its me! Yamazaki! Please stop!" Chizuru's eyes grew to the size of saucers.

"Yamaâ€|Yamazaki!?" Chizuru let her arm go limp in his grip. Underneath her, Yamazaki used his free hand to pull down the black mask covering his face. His face was grim but his eyes held warmth and a hint of mirth.

"Yes, its me. I came to find you. It sounds like everyone is looking for youâ€|and I can see whyâ€|" he added under his breath. Chizuru's face turned bright red. She had just attacked her main line of help.

Quickly she scrambled up and off of him and offered him a hand up. He took it greatfully and came to stand in front of her. "I'm so sorry! Please forgive me! I couldn't see your face and I thoughtâ€|" Yamazaki raised a hand to silence her.

"It is alright. I understand. That was quick thinking though. And in a kimono no less", Yamazaki added playfully. Chizuru raised her eyes to meet his.

"I'm sorry!" She bowed again. Chuckling he pulled her back up.

"Please enough. Its fine. But we need to get you out of here." Chizuru nodded in agreement. She did not want to stay her longer than she needed to. Before anything else could be said, a shadow filled the barely lite room making it dark once more. Chizuru and Yamazaki both snapped their heads to the door. In it stood the drunken leader.

"Betrayal huh? Running to the arms of another man!?" he shouted. Yamazaki glanced from the drunkard to Chizuru back to the drunkard.

"No! I am a ninja. Hired by this establishment to protect the young princesses from harm!" Both Chizuru and the drunkard starred at Yamazaki in confusion.

"Yamazaki?" Chizuru whispered.

"Just play along! They can't find out the Shinsengumi are involved", he whispered back. Chizuru's eyes grew in realization. If these people found out the Shinsengumi where here it could ruin everything.

"I will not allow you to hurt the young princess!" Yamazaki yelled at the drunk. He swayed back and forth in the doorway before letting a large bellow of a laugh escape him.

"Enough of this. No more games. Give me my woman!" He stumbled towards the pair with his hands raised to grab Chizuru. Yamazaki pushed Chizuru to the side and flipped the man over.

"Quickly! Go princess!" He yelled at her. Chizuru gave him an incredulous look before rushing out the door and back into the hallway. Before she was out of range, she swore she could hear Yamazaki yell "Tatami flip!" Running again down various hallways, she found herself completely lost. She was at another dead end hallway and she could hear the men looking for her coming closer.

"Shit..." she cursed silently. Suddenly the door behind her opened silently and a hand came around her waist and another around her mouth pulling her into the dark room. Chizuru's instincts took over before the door closed. Her elbow came forward and flew backwards into the person's stomach. A small grunt came from them. Her left hand grabbed the hand over her mouth and she twisted the arm and herself out of this grip till she had the man on his knees with his hand and arm extended in the air ready for her to break.

Her eyes fully adjusted to the darkness, Chizuru came face to face once again with Saito.

***BUWAHAHAHAHAHAHA! Yet another cliffy! Sorry it always takes me so long to write, but I promise I don't forget about you guys! Let me know what y'all think! Next one will come out soon! (For real though. I promise! Like tomorrow soon. Or maybe even today!) Love ya!

Chapter Fifteen

"We really have to stop meeting like this don't we!?" Chizuru all but shouted in nervousness. This reminded her greatly of her first night with the Shinsengumi before they were friends anyway. Saito's blush did not fade when he apologized.

"No I must apologize. It was unkind to grab you in such a way. I should have warned you." Saito bowed in apology.

"No! Please! Don't apologize. I was rash. I should have known it was you. I was just soâ€¡", Chizuru trailed off and hung her head. It wasn't often that she became so nervous or panicky like that. Saito merely regarded her in silence.

"We must get out of here. Heisuke is outside on the other side. He will help guide you back to headquarters. Hopefully you got the information you were looking for?" Chizuru starred at the ground hard for a moment.

"I'm not sure. But I may have. I believe the Satsuma and the Choshu are working together. From what it sounds like, they are the ones behind employing children to do their bidding. But I still do not know who exactly is behind this. I have nothing against either domain. So there is no reason for them to come after me." Saito listened carefully and stood silently as he regarded what she said.

"Hijikata will need to know this. This is something that most definitely involves all of us now", Hijikata finally spoke. Chizuru nodded her head. "Now it is time to get you out of here, butâ€¡" Saito trailed off at the sound of rushed footsteps down the hallway. All at once the door was thrust open and five men entered the room.

"You! You have to be the one! Come with us! NOW!" a tall man up front screamed. It seems that they were beyond mad. Each one gave Chizuru a once over causing her to move slightly behind Saito. She really hated it when men leered at women like that. It makes you feel like a piece of meat in front of a wolf.

"Hand over the girl and we may go easy on you." Saito's face adorned a grimace.

"I really don't like being interrupted. It's not polite. She and I were having a conversation." His voice was harsh and sharp like the edge of a blade. The men in front of them were visibly shaken, but they did not back down. "Chizuru, if you pleaseâ€¡"

One of the men shouted and cut Saito off, "Hey! Don't act like we aren't here!" He moved forward and grabbed Saito's shoulder. Instantaneously Saito's hand shot backwards and punched the man in the face sending him flying back. Chizuru's eyes widened. 'Remind me never to get on his bad sideâ€¡.' She thought to herself.

"As I was saying, Chizuru, if you would please, move back so that you do not come to harm." Chizuru's eyes grew wide and she moved back to far end of the room. Saito slowly turned around to find two of the men helping up the man who came face to fist with Saito.

"I do not wish to hurt you. Leave now and everything will be forgotten." Taking this as an insult Chizuru's pursuers unsheathed their blades. "So be it", was all Saito said as he unsheathed his own blade. However, he turned it over so the blade faced him.

Chizuru was just about to speak before her breath was taken away. All at once there was a blur of action. He moved like lightning; striking quick and on to the next one before anyone had time to react. Watching him fight was like watching water flow along a riverbed. So fluid and soft, but with the power of a raging storm. Within just a matter of minutes every assailant was dealt with. Each man lay groaning on the floor in a heap of bruises and destroyed pride.

Sheathing his sword, Saito turned and stepped toward Chizuru offering her a hand. "If you are ready."

Chizuru in a daze reached out and took his hand and felt a bolt of lightning shoot through her hand. She squeezed harder out of reflex. If he felt anything Saito gave no hint to it. Gracefully he guided her around the heap of men and out into the cold night air again. Soon after they were standing in front of a doorway that lead to the street. Turning to her he spoke once more.

"Heisuke will be right down the street. He will take you back to headquarters. Shinpachi has already brought all of your things back. So go straight back." Chizuru nodded and made to move towards the street. However, before she could go further, Saito gave a slight tug to their still entwined hands causing her to face him again.

"You look beautiful", was all he said as he swept her hand up to his mouth and placed a soft kiss on the back of her hand. With lightning speed he let go and disappeared back into Shimbara's. Stunned for just a moment Chizuru starred after him. Her whole body was tingling. In a daze she turned and stepped into the crowded street. A crowd had formed in front of Shimbara's off to her left. The commotion she had caused was getting a lot of attention.

She searched the crowd for Heisuke, but to no avail. She couldn't find him. She was about to panic again when Hijikata appeared in front of her. "Yukimara-kun?" he asked.

"Hijikata! Thank Kami!" she sighed relieved to see him.

"Come. We must go." Hijikata grabbed her wrist and started walking back towards the headquarters. They walked almost in silence the entire way. A few times she faltered but she kept her mouth shut. He was walking so fast! And the shoes where not allowing her to move quickly. Seeing her pained face however, Hijikata slowed down a bit once they were out of the main part of the city.

"Are you alright?" His voice was gruff but she could tell he was sincere.

"Mmmâ€|yes. I'm fine thank you." She smiled warmly at him. He stopped suddenly and turned to her.

"There is no need to lie Chizuru. I can tell you are hurt." He knelt down in front of her and slightly lifted her kimono to see her feet

and ankles. Her right ankle was slightly swollen. "You aren't used to these shoes are you?" She grimaced as he touched it lightly and smiled sheepishly at him. It was all the answer he needed. He rose to his full height again.

"We can't help you if you don't tell us. We can and are here to help you." With that, he turned and started a slow walk back to the Shinsengumi headquarters.

When they reached the gate, Okita was leaning against the post.

"Well well well. Hijikata-san the demon has brought back such a lovely lotus flower? However did you manage that Hijikata?" Okita laughed at his own joke.

"Shut it Okita. Help her back to her room. And make sure Sanan-san sees her ankle. It's sprained", Hijikata huffed and turned to walk into the compound.

"Gesh, alright. So touchy", Okita grumbled at Hijikata's back. "So, you hurt yourself?" Okita turned to Chizuru and regarded her from head to toe. Chizuru huffed and started to hobble into the compound.

"I'm fine. He's just over reacting." Before she could go any further though Okita scooped her up in his arms and carried her over to the wooden walkway and set her down. "Hey! What are you?"

"Oh hush, I'm just following orders." Okita's face remained facing down to hide his blush. Slowly he took off her sandals and saw exactly what Hijikata was talking about. Her right ankle was much larger than her left. gingerly he picked her up bridal style and carried her towards her room.

"Okita, this really isn't necessary. I've had much worse. I promise I can walk just fine." Chizuru struggled lightly against Okita. He simply shook his head and kept on walking.

"I have to follow orders, or else Hijikata will have my head."

"He didn't say carry me though did he?" Chizuru smirked at Okita's pink blush again but said nothing more. When he reached her room he set her down on the bed and said he would be back shortly with Sanan-san to check out her ankle.

When he shut the door behind him, Chizuru began to disrobe from the heavy kimono. It took her a few minutes to get everything off and she found herself sweating lightly at the exertion. 'How women do this every day is beyond me', she groaned. She quickly dressed in her normal clothing before a quite knock rapped at her door. It was Sanan-san to check on her. He quickly and quietly wrapped her ankle and foot and told her to get enough sleep before leaving her to do so.

Finally alone, Chizuru thought of everything that had happened that night. It was far more interesting than she had first anticipated. She shuddered at the thought of the leaders face as he continuously ogled her body throughout the night. Not only him though, but many of his men. Part of her wanted to stand up and kick all of them in the

face. But there was a nagging feelingâ€|that someoneâ€|someone she knew had been thereâ€|watching her. She closed her eyes and thought hard. She went through all of her senses and replayed the night in her head over and over again before it hit her.

She sat up with a gasp. He had been there. Her mind couldn't have been playing tricks on her. Faint images of his profile flitted through her mind. The scent of his clothing and musk. He had been there. But how? And why hadn't he done anything? Chizuru threw back the covers and grabbed her blade that had been lying next to her. Her palms were sweaty as she grasped it tightly. Slowly she laid back in her futon. She closed her eyes only to have his image haunt her eyelids.

When she awoke the next morning, she went immediately to the dining room that seated the Shinsengumi leaders. Heisuke and Okita dawned very faint blushes and looked away from Chizuru as she entered.

'That'sâ€|not normalâ€|' she pondered. Slowly she took her seat between Okita and the empty spot that belonged to Saito. Both he and Hijikata were still missing. Turning to look at Heisuke again she noticed his face was redder. Just as she was about to open her mouth to ask if he was alright, Heisuke blurted out loud, "I'm so sorry!" Heisuke's face all but smacked the mats beneath him in a bow.

"What!? For what Heisuke?" Chizuru rose slightly in an attempt to make him get up. Harada gave a small headshake telling her to sit back down.

"I wasn't there! I just couldn't stand it! You were so beautiful and thoseâ€|those BASTARDS had their handsâ€|.gah! I couldn't take it!" Heisuke sat back up with his head hung low.

"Heisukeâ€|what are you talking about?" Chizuru tilted her head in concern.

"I was supposed to be thereâ€|and I wasn't. Iâ€|.ran back to headquarters. I tried to tell them to come get you. It just wasn't right!" Heisuke's head shot up at his declaration to meet Chizuru's eyes. She sat puzzled for a moment before smiling softly.

"Heisuke, its fine. I understand that your heart was in the right place. And everything went fine. I'm here aren't I?" She tilted her head to the side again and regarded him softly. He really was young. He had so much more life to liveâ€|and she hoped that he would have the chance to live it. He was gallant and a gentlemen. That was hard to find these days.

"I'm stillâ€|so sorry Chizuru. I should have been there."

"Yes. You should have been there", Hijikata spoke from the doorway. He and Saito entered the room and took their seats. "You have patrol today Heisuke." His face was stern but not unforgiving.

"Yes sir", was all Heisuke said as he starred at his food. This was not going to be good. She needed to cheer the boy up.

"Hijikata-san, may I accompany Heisuke on his patrol today?" She faced Hijikata fully. Heisuke's head shot up to stare at her dumbfounded. Hijikata was silent for a moment before speaking.

"Of course. But before you leave I want a briefing on last night."

"Yes. Of course", Chizuru bowed and turned back forward. She gave Heisuke a quick little smile and he gave a small one of his own in return. He seemed a little relieved now.

With breakfast now eaten and put away, the Shinsengumi leaders gathered once again in the main room to listen to the retelling of the previous night's festivities. Saito and Yamazaki gave their reports quickly and straight to the point. When it came time for Chizuru to speak however, she took a deep breath and remained silent for a short moment.

"I believe...", she took another deep breath before looking Hijikata straight in the eye, "I have reason to believe that my father was there last night."

****TADAAAAA! Hopefully you guys like this chapter. I also hope you guys like the few twists and turns I throw in there. Within the next two chapters SOMETHING is going to happen. In fact I have such a big idea that I may post another chapter by the end of today. However, I'm still not sure if I'm going to follow the original story line anymore or take it off into my very own plot. In other words I'm not sure if I'm going to include the battles and such from the original story. What do you guys think anyway? Let me know! I have something pretty big planned and I'm hoping you guys will like it. If you have any suggestions or ideas please feel free to let me know! I love you guys!

19. Update! XD

Hey guys! I'm getting ready to write the next chapter I promise! I was kinda really busy with some big army stuff so that's why I haven't been able to write in a while. I feel horrible for leaving you guys on such a cliff hanger...but it's gonna be good I promise! Love you all!

20. Chapter 16

Chapter Sixteen

The room was silent. Everyone leaned a little more forward towards Chizuru. Hijikata's eyes grew tense and focused and his brow furrowed. She took a deep breath before straightening her back once more.

"I have thought now, for the past few days, how I should tell you what I am about to tell you. Before I can fully explain to you how I believe my father was there, there are a few things which I must help you to understand. For you, this will be something...very different to hear and soon experience. All I ask of you is to hear me out completely, before you make any judgments or comments. This will be difficult for me, and you all will be among the first...humans...I have ever told this to."

Glances were exchanged between the captains at her words. Hijikata's

mouth drew into a thin line as he crossed his arms. To her left, both Saito and Okita wore similar blank expressions. Okita however, seemed to have a hint of danger in the air that surrounded him. This was exactly what she was afraid of. She stole a glance to her right to see the other three captains. Harada's face was grim but still warm and somehow understanding. Heisuke and Shinpachi simply looked lost. She was afraid of what danger she would be putting herself in by telling them what she was about to.

She feared this next moment more than anything in her life. She trembled visibly and a wave of concern flashed through each man. Despite their obvious discomfort they still seemed to care for her. She could only account their easy acceptance of her presence to a fellow bond as warriors. Yes she was female, but to them she had proven herself just as worthy and capable if not more than they.

Their silence urged her into her next deep breath.

"The man you know as my father, is not truly my biological father. He is more like my caretaker. However, he has been my sole provider for so long, that he is in all rights the same as a father to me. He cared for me when I was sick, mentored me when I was young, and brought me to be the person you see today. My true parents, were both killed when I was quite young." Hesiuke's eyes widened.

"Close to my household, there was another family of the same...stature and nobility as ours. However, they saw us as a...hindrance, my family and I. So one day, they destroyed my home, with my parents still inside." Harada shook his head in disbelief and Shinpachi gripped the hilt of his sword tighter.

"As I said, my family held a noble title...but not any sort of title you would hear of. My family...my parents...I...am not human." Hijikata's face became angry but he held his tongue.

"I am what you would call...a demon." Okita burst out laughing.

"Do you really expect us to believe that?" His eyes searched hers looking for the sign of her insanity. Chizuru simply shook her head.

"I do not expect you to believe me. So...that is why I must...show you." Chizuru drew her katana from its sheath. Hijikata and Sanan jumped to their feet to stand in front of Kondo.

Exasperated Kondo pushed the two back down, "Honestly if you thought she wished ANY of us harm she would have done it already. Listen to her words! Look at her face! Does it look like she means us harm? Does it look like she speaks lies Okita?" He stared at Okita hard. In turn, Okita stared harshly into Chizuru's eyes. Slowly the danger she sensed from him before faded.

Chizuru had to choke back tears. These men, these captains of the Shinsengumi...were more understanding than she could ever imagine. All her life she was taught that humans were horrible, untrustworthy creatures that would kill her the moment they found her secret. She bowed till her forehead was plastered to the mat before her.

"Kondo-san, your words humble me more than you know." Raising her head to smile at Kondo tears rushed down her face. He let out a smile before speaking.

"Child, I am too old now to be so cold-hearted. Dry your tears and please continue. You are most certainly the most interesting young woman I have ever had the pleasure of meeting." His warm smile only wanted to make her cry more. She brushed the tears from her eyes and took a shaking deep breath.

"What I am about to do, may frighten you. Please do not be alarmed for my safety. Large eyes darted back between the captains before continuing to stare her down.

Gingerly she picked her blade up once more and rolled up the sleeve of her left arm. Saito began to slowly rise in alarm. Okita was already on the edge of freaking out with Heisuke. In a quick movement, Chizuru sliced at the skin of her arm. At once, all of the men jumped up to rush to her side. Just as quickly she flew to the back of the room in the blink of an eye.

"Please please! Sit and watch!" Chizuru's eyes grew wide at their movements. She was still terrified of the outcome of her brash decision to tell them all of this. She was prepared that at any moment they would move to cut her down. The men, disorientated by her quickness, slowly began to move back into their seats.

Chizuru let her arm out in front of her for them to see. The blood was flowing quickly. In her excitement of the moment, she had cut herself a little deeper than she had intended to. This would take a moment to happen. Slowly a pool of blood began to form on the floor. Beside her Harada began to grow more visibly distraught.

She wiggled her arms and fingers a bit to try and speed up the process. Slowly, before their eyes, the captain's of the Shinsengumi stared in wonder as they watch the blood flow begin to slow. From the far edges of the cut, she began to heal. Within another minute, her wound was healed over with new fresh pink skin.

She lifted her head to stare at each captain in return. Shinpachi and Heisuke sat back in total awe and bewilderment. Hijikata, for once, wore a look of surprise. Both Saito and Okita were still clutching the pillows on which they sat and Kondo looked completely dumbfounded. With a sigh of relief and almost...anguish, Harda released the breath he was holding.

"But there is one more thing I must show you, before you may speak. I must show you, my other form." Once again each captain in turn drew in a breath and held it. Closing her eyes, Chizuru let out a shaky breath and began to concentrate.

Slowly, Chizuru's hair began to turn white and her nails grew longer. A small purple diamond appeared on the center of her head and three purple stripes on her cheeks. When she opened her eyes, instead of her normal pale blue eyes, dark purple eyes stared back at the Shinsengumi. Slowly, the captains rose to their feet.

Backing up till her back was against the wall, her eyes darted to the doorway.

21. Chapter 17

Chapter Seventeen

Chizuru's hands were sweating. She stretched her fingers out wide before balling them into a fist again. She was starting to feel the edges of panic in her vision. Hijikata raised a hand into the air to stop all movement. Obediently the Shinsengumi captains listened and halted where they stood.

"Miss Yukimura, to say we are stunned is an understatement. But please do not be alarmed. I will not allow any harm to come to you. However I must stress that this information you have provided us with is...perplexing." Beside him Sanan twitched. It took all Chizuru had to not bolt out of the room and to keep her eyes on Hijikata. She felt like a caged wild animal. Sensing her distress, Harada and Shinpachi, the two closest to her, both took a small step back to give her room.

"I must ask that you give us some time to digest this information. But you must remain in this room. We will leave to give you some time to calm down." With a jerk of his head towards the door, slowly they filed out of the door one by one. As they did Chizuru inched her way farther away and into the corner. She stood there watching each one leave before they closed the door and left her alone in silence.

Collapsing to the floor Chizuru began to pant. Her hair pony tail drifted to the side and covered half of her face as she starred at her hands on the mat in front of her. She knew that if she had to, in her current form, she could have made it out if it had come to a fight. The room began tilting to the left at the thought. Slowly she eased her head to the floor to rest her forehead on the mat between her hands.

A lot of things were changing now. Everything she heard about humans and their true nature was starting to dissolve. From what her father had told her, all of them should have jumped to kill her the moment they saw her heal. But they didn't; not even when she revealed her true form.

A small cough escaped Chizuru's chest. She hadn't been in this form for quite a long time. The new sensations and smells were a tad overwhelming. It wasn't that she detested this form, it was part of her. She could not hate any part of herself. But it was much easier to just remain concealed as a human.

"This is gonna hurt...", she thought to herself. Slowly she chanted under breath to conceal her true nature once again. Her hair slid back to black and her nails grew shorter. She panted at the effort it took to return to the form the Shinsengumi came to know. The stripes on her cheeks slowly faded into her flesh and the diamond on her forehead flickered in pain.

"Here it comes", she gasped in her head. A sharp pain shot through her body and ended between her eyes. Gasping aloud she fell to the side as her hands flew to cover her face. She could not explain why it hurt so much to conceal herself, but it always did.

"I really don't want to do this again anytime soon", she mumbled out loud. gingerly she got back into a sitting position and threw her ponytail back over her shoulder. She glanced towards the closed door and her brow knitted in thought.

"This went much differently than I expected. These men...are so much different than they seem." Her thoughts drifted to each captain in turn. She would not soon forget their expressions at her transformation. How they were taking this she couldn't tell. Her mind slid to Saito and she bit her lip.

"Why does he perplex me so? Why should his opinion matter any more than the others?" She fidgeted with the edge of sleeve. Immediately she remembered how much she bleed and started to panic about cleaning it up. Gracefully she got up and returned to where she had ate breakfast and grabbed the towel she used to clean her hands and began to clean the blood up.

As she cleaned, she began to wonder how long it would take the Shinsengumi to return. And when they did...what exactly would happen next? As she was just about to finish, she heard footsteps approach from outside. Sitting back on her thighs she waited as the silhouette of whoever was approaching filled up the doorway. Slowly the door began to slide open, and as it did, Chizuru was filled with dread.

Standing in the doorway, was Kaoru...and next to him stood Kazama. Chizuru leapt up and backed away towards the wall.

"What is the meaning of this!?", she shouted. She was enraged and confused at the same time. What where they doing together. Karuo was supposed to be dead. But there he was, standing in all his glory with a smirk on his face to boot. Kazama stood next to him in his trade mark lazy and unconcerned way that he did wearing a half smirk.

"I told you I would return for you", he chuckled out. Chizuru drew her sword and held it out level before her.

"You had best explain yourselves. YOU especially...Kaoru", her voice almost choked on his name. At the mention of his name Kaoru laughed.

"Oh dearest sister are you not happy to see me again? What kind of greeting is this?", he pointed towards her drawn sword.

"YOU WERE DEAD! They told me you were dead! I grieved for so long! YET HERE YOU ARE? It is you who should be concerned with greeting me little brother!" Chizuru was shouting now. This was too much. What had happened to him? How was he here? Why did her comrades...if they ever were...LIE to her?

A thunder of footsteps clamored down the hall. In the courtyard now stood the captains of the Shinsengumi. Each with a drawn katana and ready to fight. Chizuru was on the verge of panicking...or passing out. She wasn't so sure. She needed to get out of here. What she did next surprised everyone.

Throwing herself backwards she vaulted through the panel and out into the other hallway. Quickly she jumped up and began to ran. The headquarters was a maze, but as she ran she released her concealment

and was once again the demon Chizuru. Her footsteps became lighter and she ran faster. She darted around corners and found herself at an outer wall.

Without a second guess she vaulted over the wall and out into the alleyway behind. About a hundred yards in front of her there was a wood line. She sprinted with all her might out into the trees only to be snagged back by two strong arms. Instinctively she struggled against her captor as they turned her towards them.

Kazama stared down into Chizuru's eyes with a wicked smile. He held her to him tighter and her eyes grew wide in fear. Kazama had taken on his true form as well. She had always suspected but could never really discover the truth. Kazama was a demon as well. However, unlike Chizuru, two smallish white horns protruded from his forehead and two long fangs peeked out of his wicked smile.

"You little once, are coming with me. It is time we join our bloodlines Chizuru." Chizuru's mouth fell open.

"The hell we are!" Chizuru shouted as she kicked him in the groan. Caught by surprise Kazama did not have enough time to block the kick and his grip loosened just enough to allow her to escape. Not daring to glance back Chizuru bolted further into the wood line.

Hoping to throw him off she threw three pellets to her right and two to her front before darting to the right and running full speed ahead. What she had thrown were pellets that contained concentrated drops of her scent. When he did find time to catch up, hopefully he would be confused and pick a different route than the one she had taken.

As she ran, tears started to stream down her face. 'How did this happen? I have no idea what's going on and I feel so lost...' she thought to herself. Blinded momentarily by her tears, she wasn't able to see that she had reached the end of the tree line again and was about to burst out into an open street.

However, as she did, a form stepped in her path and she collided into the strong arms of...

"Chizuru? Kami you run fast!", Saito breathed out in a grunt. He squeezed his arms around her and threw the cloak he was carrying over her head as she struggled.

"Stop your struggling. I am not here to hurt you." Chizuru's eyes met his stern face and she slowed her struggling. Seeing that she was now paying attention, Saito pulled her into a sitting position and secured the cloak about her head. He looked concentrated but when his eyes slid to hers, they softened just a fraction. Seeing the confusion upon her face, Saito began to speak.

"I will not lie, I am very confused. So are the others. But we do not hate you. We just simply do not understand. We do however understand that telling us was extremely difficult and that must be why you did not tell us initially. It appears Hijikata and Kondo-san are willing to overlook that." He paused briefly to make sure she was still following him. "I too can overlook that. The others right now are looking for you too. The man you called Kazama last time has already left. The second intruder is gone as well. It is safe to come back,

if you are willing."

Tears formed once again in her eyes and she bowed her head. She starred at her hands for a moment before throwing herself into his chest and began to weep. Stunned he had no idea what to do, before gently placing a hand on the back of her head. Slowly, he picked her up bridal style and got to his feet. Turning back towards the headquarters, he began the long walk back.

22. SHOUT OUT UPDATE!

So I just wanted to give a quick shout out to all of my followers and everyone who has favorited my story! You can not believe how happy it makes me to see that I have 75 followers! It makes me think I might actually be good at this whole writing thing. LOL But at the same time, I also want to apologize to all of you, even those of you who don't even have accounts and have been waiting ages for me to update. It has been a while since I last wrote anything and honestly I don't really have an excuse. Yes life was busy and there was a long period of time I didn't even have a computer, but I found myself thinking "its been a while since I wrote. I should post a chapter..." but my lazy butt didn't.

And so with a little shame I hang my head. BUT! (there is always a butt of course) I am happy to say that I have found the conviction and motivation to write again! (fireworks go off in the distance) I hope you guys are all liking where I'm going with this story. If it wasn't as big of a plot twist as I thought, I'll tell you here exactly what it was. Karou is in fact...NOT DEAD...and Kazama is a demon...which Chizuru did not know this... and the two are working together. Just a heads up...in the next chapter you are gonna see some flash backs to the old days before Karou's "death" and you'll see the relationships between all the characters and how they mesh (or don't).

Also I know I kind of made Chizuru cry a lot in this, but I felt it was kind of necessary. She's going through a lot. First her brother is dead, then he isn't. Kazama returns unexpectedly and is somehow able to find her when she doesn't want to be found...least of all by him. She has just told the first humans ever that she is a demon princess and they DIDN'T want to kill her. All her ideals about humans are changing. AAAAAAND this whole business with Saito is really throwing her for a loop. Now, with that in mind...during one of these flashbacks you are going to see a different side of Chizuru as well. From the time she was a child to the time where she was under Master Maseru to the Chizuru we know with the Shinsengumi...are all different. SO BE PREPAAAARRREED! *Scar's evil song plays along* MUUAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!

Ahem...well anyway, again...I love you all for following, favoriting, and just plain READING my story at all! Thank you and keep your eyes open for the NEEEEXT CHAPTER! XOXOXO

23. Chapter 18

Chapter Eighteen

When they arrived back at headquarters Saito took Chizuru to her room

when she was finally able to stand again. Chizuru wiped at her eyes and looked at the ground afraid to meet his eyes. A silent moment passed before Saito turned to exit. Without thinking her hand shot out to grab his sleeve. Surprised at her actions she immediately let go.

"I'm sorry, I just...I just wanted to say thank you. I apologize for...crying...so much. That was very rude of me." Chizuru felt her face heat up thinking about how she cried almost the whole way back. She had just been so overwhelmed that she couldn't hold it in. And when Saito had picked her up...she completely lost it. Only twice before had anyone picked her up like that; once after her parents were killed and once after a failed mission. Not even when she was told her brother was killed did she cry like that or let anyone touch her. She had kept her face stern and continued on with the mission. She only every cried in moments of secrecy...if at all.

A moment of silence passed between the two, but Saito did not leave.

"As fighters, we are taught not to show weakness by crying. But I have found...that sometimes, shedding tears can be appropriate. It seems to me that you have been through a lot. I would...I would rather you cried in front of me, then anyone else...or even by yourself." Chizuru dared to look up and meet his eyes.

"I feel this...need...to protect," Saito's eyebrows knitted for a moment before he continued, "to protect innocence. I fight for what is right and to protect those who cannot protect themselves. You are very capable of protecting yourself, I know this very well. But I also feel that even my fellow comrades here in the Shinsengumi, have innocence within them that needs to be protected same as you. I would do the same for anyone."

For a moment she felt a little disappointed; why she couldn't exactly pinpoint, but she smiled despite herself. Saito's brow knitted in concentration before he spoke again.

"Take a moment to compose yourself. If you are hungry, go to the kitchen and make yourself something. Once all the captain's are assembled again, we will speak once more I am sure." With that Saito ducked out of her room and closed the door.

As his footsteps faded away, Chizuru slowly sank to the floor to sit on her knees. For the first time in a long time...Chizuru was lost. She didn't know what she was supposed to do. Blankly she starred at her hands.

It seemed almost a lifetime ago now, but Chizuru remembered the first time she had ever felt lost. With her parents death, she was left alone. She and Kaoru did their best to survive, but she didn't know who to trust. After all, it was family 'friends' that had left the vulnerable. At the time, they both did not know that Kodo was their families most trusted person and their dedicated caretaker. So Kaoru and Chizuru had run into the woods and hid themselves away for weeks.

Unfortunately, they were being tracked and eventually found. The same family that had killed their parents sought money. Held in captivity, both Kaoru and Chizuru were held apart, and tortured. They always

asked the same questions.

"Where did your father hide it?"

"Where is the key?"

"If you don't tell us we will kill your brother!"

"Stop lying you little bitch! We know you know where it is!"

Their shouts still echoed in Chizuru's mind. For at least two weeks, Chizuru was tortured. She had never wished for death up until then, but she prayed for it every night she was there. But every night, her wounds slowly healed leading her into another day of torture when the sun rose.

Chizuru looked at her hands numbly. She remembered being thrown out into a ditch to rot. The torture was too much for her young body, so much so that even her demon blood would no longer heal her. Expecting her to die out in the elements, her captors weren't expecting her to be found.

Within a week she was nursed back to health and returned to Kondo. She still couldn't figure out how they knew were to take her. Nor could she figure out how Kaoru was already with him when she entered the house.

Both sat before a table drinking tea. The Kaoru who sat before her looked different, more malnourished, but still healthier than she had looked at the time. When she questioned him, he had simply chuckled and ruffled her hair and explained that he had escaped.

"Then why didn't you come back for me?"

"I didn't know where you were. They had told me you were dead." Kaoru's face held sympathy, but not his eyes.

"But...how did you escape? They had me locked in a cage underground....I...I couldn't stand or sit...how did you..."

Kaoru cut her off, "I was simply strong enough to break out that's all."

Sitting in the Shinsengumi headquarters now, she wondered how much of that was true.

Chizuru took a deep breath and cleared her mind. She was here now. And she needed to figure out what to do.

Slowly she opened her eyes and began to move again. It was time to face the others.

Short chapter I know! But I've been busy with school and work, but I still wanted to get a chapter out for you guys! I hope you enjoy! As always any and all feedback is welcome! LOVE YOU!

With great difficulty Chizuru made her way down the hall and to the main room where she had revealed all. Timidly, she sat down before the door and tapped. The voices inside drifted to silence before Hijikata's stern voice called for her to enter. Slowly she slid the door open to find Sanan and Kondo standing in the room alongside Hijikata. The rest of the captains were absent.

Pulling herself into the room, she slid the door shut behind her and rose to her feet. Coming to stand about ten feet away she kept her eyes on the ground in front of her. Her nerves were going to kill her at this point waiting in the silence.

'Please...say something already...I feel like I'm drowning in this silence', Chizuru picked at the hem of her shirt.

"Miss Yukimara, please do not fret too much." It was Kondo's kind words that lifted her gaze finally. His expression was as soft as it had been the previous day when she was just a human girl looking for her father. Glancing between the three men, they could almost read her mind.

"We are going to continue to let you stay with us. We have come to the conclusion that the information you have given us...was a difficult task...and therefore, we will overlook its delay. Remember, we did ask you to keep no more secrets from us. But, if at this point in time, if you have anything further to divulge to us...for the love of Kami...say it now." Hijikata's voice was low and rumbled through her chest even with the distance between them.

Quickly she shook her head no. "NO! I mean...no...there is nothing else for me to tell you. I mean...that is to say...there is nothing that would further cause the Shinsengumi difficulties or bring anyone here into danger...than what has already been said." Chizuru blushed.

Thinking back on it, Hijikata had told her to be completely honest with them. The moment she should have told them of her blood heritage would have been then.

'But how was I supposed to tell you that exactly? Oh hey by the way...', Chizuru jested. Focusing again on Hijikata fully, she saw him take a slow inhale.

"Good. Now...to move along, we will of course have to put you on a sort of...probation. You can not leave the compound without the company of one of the other captains. You must also make us aware of anything that should come up. For example this...Kazama...and whoever that was with him and why exactly they are here at all."

"The other man with Kazama, was my brother. As I feared, it seems he is alive, but that he also is up to something that I still can not discern. All I know is that they are both looking for me alongside of Kono."

"Your father seemed like such a good man. I can't fathom why his attitude changed so quickly", Kondo spoke up. Sanan's glasses glinted in the low light as he shook his head in agreement.

"Your father was a man of science. When he brought us the Water of

Life, we thought it was a miracle cure from the west." Chizuru's eyebrows furrowed.

"From the west? I thought they had made it in his lab...from scratch." Sanan crossed his arms.

"When he had presented it to us, he had said it was an elixir from the west that he had brought back with him. He said he watched it make a sickly man into a brand new warrior."

"That I did not know. That could completely change his angle."

"What do you mean?", Hijikata interjected.

"Well...what I mean is...from whoever...or rather where ever he got this elixir from could possibly change the original purpose of the elixir. My father could have simply twisted the original elixir into what it is now. Perhaps it was not always as it is, but it was something that could heal a man. I would have to know exactly where he got it from to know for sure though. He is a doctor of western medicine. So his connections in the west are varied throughout the countryside there. I wouldn't even know where to begin to even ask."

A moment of silence passed. "Chizuru. Is it possible that someone back in the west, could have possibly changed the way Kono thought? As in his beliefs?", Sanan asked.

"Not in the west I don't think. His colleagues in the west were much different then we are. They don't believe in the same things my father did. They have folk tails of demons, but they are told as ghost stories...not as warnings. However..." Chizuru trailed off for a moment. "Back in Kyoto...father had last met with a new practitioner of medicine. When he came back from there...he was different. But I thought nothing of it. It was just little things. Staying up all night in his lab, skipping meals, not sleeping as much. That was when he started working on the elixir. And shortly after he asked me to call for Master Maseru to come. He had said it was important."

"I had left town for a month to do some work, and when I came back...that was when they had had their breakthrough. And the rest...you of course know."

"Did your father ever say who he had gone to meet?" Hijikata asked.

"No he didn't. But I know they had held some correspondence back and forth before he had left. The letters may still be at our home."

"Hijikata...do you think Chizuru could travel home to retrieve the letters? If we can find out who he met, we can possibly find out where Kono is now. Perhaps this other doctor and Kono are still working together", Sanan spoke. Chizuru's eyes looked him over. He was more calculating than he looked.

'This man is always thinking...makes my brain hurt. How didn't I think of it myself though...', she scolded herself. Hijikata took a moment to think.

"What do you think Toshi?", Kondo asked. Hijikata's eyebrows knitted into a deep V on his forehead. 'If you keep doing that you'll get wrinkles', Chizuru thought.

"I suppose it could be arranged. But who can we ask to take her? We still need to perform our regular duties here."

"Yamazaki and Shimada could take her. The both are lacking employment as of this morning", Sanan offered.

"I suppose. And with Chizuru gone, those who are after her will think she has left. Perhaps they will even change their view to elsewhere to search for you. Well then, Sanan you go inform the two of their new mission. Chizuru, you go and pack. You will leave tomorrow."

"Yes sir!", Chizuru all but shouted as she bowed.

It still surprised her how well they were taking everything. Only a few hours ago she had almost completely turned the headquarters upside down. She had yet to meet with the other captains to gauge how they were taking this, but if she knew anything, they would obey their leader's orders. She was safe for the moment. Quickly she made her way to her room to pack.

25. Chapter 20

Chapter 20

It was decided that Chizuru, Yamazaki and Shimada would set out first thing in the morning, before the sun rose. Chizuru was somehow able to slip a few short hours of sleep in before the knock at her door woke her. Gently, she rose from her sleeping mat and walked to the door. Sliding it open she was surprised to find Heisuke.

"Heisuke!" Her voice cut off at the look on his face. A faint pink blush dusted his cheeks and he scuffed the ground with his sandal.

"Hijikata said you were going to be leaving soon. I didn't...", his gaze shot up quickly to search her face his blush deepening. "I didn't want you to leaveâ€|thinking that I didn't want to be your friend anymoreâ€|.becauseâ€|of wellâ€|earlierâ€|.earlier today that is."

Wonder filled Chizuru's eyes at his words. She had never imagined anyone like these people of the Shinsengumi would ever exist. They were rough around the edges yes but they all cared deeply in some form or another. They were compassionate under their gruff exterior and every time she caught a glimpse of that kindness her heart swelled a little more for them.

"You were beautiful! I mean not that you aren't beautiful even nowâ€|I mean you always areâ€|I mean it was just soâ€|and your eyes! Ughâ€|waitâ€|.no Iâ€|" Heisuke began to stutter. He scratched behind his head and Chizuru could almost feel the heat from his face.

Overwhelmed by his adorable confession Chizuru couldn't resist and quickly she reached out and hugged the blushing young man. Heisuke froze upon contact.

"Thank you! Heisuke thank you so much! You have no idea what this means to me!" Chizuru squeezed her arms tight around this chest. Slowly, Heisuke's arms lowered and he gently hugged her back. Smiling, she slowly let go and they both broke from their embrace. Heisuke's face shown astonishment and happiness.

"Thank you Heisuke." She smile softly.

"Of courseâ€|any time." A soft chuckle escaped his lips. "Wellâ€|I should let you get back to sleep. I know you leave soon. Umâ€|do you need anything?" His eyes widened and searched her face.

"Noâ€|thank you. I am packed. It is only a day's journey or so. It should not take us long."

"Okay thenâ€|wellâ€|I'll let you go. Goodnight!" Cheerily he began running down the hall.

"Goodnight Heisuke", she smiled after him. She slid the door closed behind her and made her way back to her sleeping mat. On the other side of the room, as she started to get into the comforter, she spoke out softly, "You can go to sleepâ€|I do not need a guardian. I thank you though...and I will see you again in a few days."

She rested her head against the pillow as she laid down and stared at the wall to her left. Slowly, a shadow rose and disappeared as it they got further away. A small smile dawned her lips as she drifted into sleep again and her dreams took over.

*****THIS IS IN A DREAM*****

_Chizuru blinked her eyes trying to see into the darkness around her. Even with her demon eyesight, she could see nothing. All she could hear was a constant dripping sound somewhere far off. Blindly her arms stretched out before her as she crawled on her knees forward.

-

_She knew this placeâ€|why though? For what seemed like an eternity, the space around her slowly grew larger. She could almost stand finally if she crouched just a bit. She could feel moisture on her knees and by the smell of it she had been crawling through dingy earth and muck and her knees were now bleeding. _

_The dripping sound became louder as she moved forward. Yet she still couldn't pinpoint its origin. _

_It sounded like it was everywhere. _

_A few drops to the left, then a few far off on her right, then faintly behind her again. She kept moving forward hoping eventually something would shed light on her surroundings. _

_Arms stretched still outward, her hand brushed something on her right. Not expecting anything to be thereâ€|she froze. _

_Her eyes were as wide as possible, trying to pick up on any light. The dripping sound was really loud now. _

_And it was right next to her. _

_Slowly, she reached her hand out again and brushed against the object. It was rough, but when her hand brushed it she swear it had moved. _

The sounds of rope straining against a heavy weight brushed her ears. She bumped the object again and she could hear it swing upon the rope. Placing both hands before her she grabbed it to stop its motion, but as soon as she did she screamed and fell backwards.

_It was a body. _

_That was flesh she had felt beneath her hands. Her breath came wildly as she gasped for air. Her eyes darted around still unable to see anything. Slowlyâ€|she crawled onto her knees and inched forward.

-

Tentatively, she reached out for the body again.

_Her fingertips brushed rough leather again. She dragged her fingers down and felt the subtle rise and fall of the leather beneath her fingertips. _

_Armor. It was leather armor. _

As her hands continued to follow the contour of the body downward, the leather gave way and she felt flesh again. It felt sticky and cold.

_Lifeless. _

Her heartbeat picked up in her ears as she realized what was before her.

Somehowâ€|suspended in the airâ€|.was a body.

Hanging upside down with its throat cut open.

*****END OF DREAM****

Chizuru awoke in a sweat at the quite tap at her door.

"I'm up. I'll be ready shortly," she called out quietly.

"We will meet at the gate in half an hour Miss Chizuru," spoke Shimada. She stared at the ceiling as she hear his footsteps leave her door.

That wasn't a dream. That was a memory. Chizuru had been there.

And as Chizuru sat their catching her breathâ€|she knew.

She would be going there again soon.

AAAAAAANNNNNND CUT! CLIFFHANGER MY LOVELIES! Okay so moving is a lot harder than you think! Three months! WOOW! But I'm fully moved in and

settled and working hard again. SOOO of course I started writing again! Don't worry I didn't forget about you guys! Let me know what you guys think and what her dream meant! LOVE YOU GUYS!

26. Chapter 21

Chapter 21

The journey had only taken a day with their fast pace, so when they arrived at Chizuru's old home dusk had fallen on the quite village. A chill ran down her spine has she surveyed her home. It looked as if no one had been living there for months. She had only left a month ago.

When her father's letters had stopped, she immediately became worried. She had traveled to all the villages on the way to Kyoto just in case he may have stopped in one on his way home. He never mentioned coming home in any of his letters, but it was still a possibility that she couldn't overlook.

Wind swept fallen autumn leaves past the house and the skittering sound they made brought goosebumps to her flesh at the memory it brought back. She had been sixteen at the time when she had faced against the creepy, crawly creatures of the Zen Forest. Maseru had sent her squad to oversee an investigation of an uprising of disappearances in the surrounding area.

*****FLASHBACK*****

"_How many victims have there been total?" Chizuru asked the village elder. His brow furrowed as he rubbed his chin in thought._

"_I would say at least twenty in the past month." His voice was coarse and grated against Chizuru's ears._

"_Twenty? Are you all stupid?!" Shiranui shouted in disbelief._

"_Kyo! Be respectful!" Chizuru admonished him. 'Honestly he never knows when to shut his mouth', Chizuru thought to herself as her eyebrow twitched. None to gently, Amagiri grabbed Shiranui's collar and dragged him back outside the small house. Chizuru thanked him silently. _

"_Do the victims share anything in common? Hair or eye color, family tiesâ€|anything?" Chizuru questioned further. _

"_They are all young. The same age actuallyâ€|Sixteen," the elder man replied._

"_That explains why it smells like prunes here then," Kazama's cold tone drifted to Chizuru's ears and caused her more annoyance than Shiranui had. _

"_Chikage, please wait outside alreadyâ€|", Chizuru gritted out through her teeth. A small smirk dawned his face, but he left anyway.

-

"_I'm sorry. I apologize for their rude behavior. Now you were saying they are all..._" Chizuru's voice died instantly. The old man in front of her was glaring at her through a thick mane of silver hair. But his eyes were blood red and glowed back at her. _

"_Finally|. I have you alone now. You succulent thing you." His voice turned her insides to stone and dread filled her head. The room became cloaked in darkness and emitted a dark ominous feeling. Chizuru jumped back and grabbed her sword and leveled her blade at his face in a quick, effortless movement. _

"_Kazama! Amagiri! Shiranui!" She shouted their names quickly and waited for the thunder of their feet._

But it never came.

"_Silly girl|.they can't hear you now. You're all alone with me. With no one to come to your poor little rescue" He started to circle around her, Chizuru keeping him in front of her the whole time. "You'll make a lovely meal. You're the perfect age. Ripe and ready for plucking." At his words he started to drool. Chizuru made a face of disgust._

"_Honestly you're disgusting. What the hell is wrong with you?" The demon in front of her simply threw his head back and a maniacal laugh ripped from his throat. Chizuru grabbed her head at his piercing bellow. 'If he keeps this up my ears will start to bleed!' The scream was deafening. She looked up to where he had been standing to find him gone. His laughter had faded into the back as she whipped her head around searching for him._

"_So scared now are we!? Where is all that tough talk now little one?" His voice bounced off the walls and assaulted her ears from all directions. "Come on now|let me hear a scream. I always LOVE it when they scream." His laughter faded and a deep silence filled the room. _

Chizuru stood as still as a stone straining her ears for any sound of him. Quietly at first|then building to an overwhelming volume came the sound that she could only describe as dead leaves skittering across the ground. All around her grotesque beetles with little glowing green eyes began to crawl from every crevice of the room. They fell from the ceiling and out from behind the shelves and came up through the floor boards.

"_WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU?" she screamed! Reaching into a small pocket in her pants she threw two pellets at the ground that caused a large chunk of the now writhing floor to burst into flame. And to her horror, the beetles screamed._

*****END OF FLASHBACK*****

It had been an ugly and very|gooey fight. She had finally found where the ugly man had hidden himself and pierced his heart to finally get rid of all the bugs. When she had emerged from the house Kazama and Shiranui had gawked at the state of her appearance.

'What a time to remember something so trivial' Chizuru mused. Yamazaki and Shimada had actually been very nice companions for the trip that she almost didn't even notice the day go by before that had

arrived.

"Thank you for accompanying me. When we get inside I can prepare a proper meal too." Chizuru smiled warmly at the men by her side.

"Oh no we couldn't!" Shimada raised his hands and smiled largely causing her own smile to widen.

"Honestly it won't be any trouble. Come, let us go." Chizuru turned forward again and slowly approached the house. However Yamazaki stopped her before she could continue. Her smile faded as she took in his solemn expression.

"This is your home. I understand. But familiarity breeds contempt and destruction. We need to sweep the house and make sure no one is lying in waiting for you." Chizuru paled for a moment. She hadn't even thought of such a thing. And she should have. She may not be in charge of a squad anymoreâ€|but there were still lives in her hands that she had to take care of.

Chizuru nodded in affirmation. "You talk to the roof. Shimada, you take the perimeter and I will take the inside." Grimly the two Shinsengumi soldier's nodded and all three quickly sprang into action.

Silently, Yamazaki took to the roof as Shimada and Chizuru quietly stole themselves to the house. Chizuru opened the front door, sliding it quietly to the side as Shimada began to survey the side of the house and disappear around the corner. After watching his back disappear, Chizuru slowly crept inside the front doorway. She peeked an eye around the corner and peered down the hallway to her left and quickly to her right.

The hall was dark but it was quite. Graceful and silent as a cat she began to creep down the hall and search each room. To her relief each room yielded nothing but quite stillness. Slowly she made her way towards her father's lab. As she grew nearer, the hair on the back of her neck stood on end. Something was off.

'It feels like someone has been hereâ€|and recently.' Chizuru lightly sniffed the air, using her demon nose to take in a new array of scents previously hidden from her human nose. She smelled a light burnt smell but nothing else. Slowly, blade drawn and at the ready, Chizuru slide the panel door open.

Before her lay her father's lab. In disarray as usual, you almost couldn't tell if someone had looted the lab or not. A stack of books to her left however, were sprawled across the floor and pages had been torn out. On his desk, vials had been spilt and broken and one of the shelves was overturn in the corner. Her eyes however were fixated on a single candle on the desk.

It was still smoking from being blown out.

27. Chapter 22

Chapter 22

Chizuru darted out of the doorway and back down the hall to the main

entrance. Springing out of the door and out into the main yard Chizuru searched frantically for Yamazaki and Shimada. Seeing no one and hearing no one, Chizuru balanced her sword in front of her and adopted a low defense stance.

Slowly she eased her way to the right side of the house. Her eyes scanned the yard, still seeing no one. As she rounded the corner of the house a twig snapped to her right. Her body snapped in the direction of the snap and she strained her eyes to focus on nothing in particular in order to catch any movement.

'There!' she shouted in her mind. In the blink of an eye she sprang forward towards the tree line. Darting to the left just in time her blade came crashed together with another blade. The sound of the two swords rang throughout the trees. Chizuru gritted her teeth at the amount of force she put behind her swing suddenly being stopped. She glared daggers at her intruder only to have her face go slack.

"Saito!?" she practically gasped. There she stood blade to blade with none other than Saito Hajime. He looked as gorgeous as everâ€|though why she thought that she had no idea, and his deep eyes held hers for a moment before the both eased the force off of their swords. "What in the world are you doing here?" Chizuru asked clearly confused.

"Hijikata-san was worried you three might be ambushed. So he had me travel behind you. I was not expecting you to realize I was here." Saito sheathed his sword.

"I wasn't. Someone elseâ€|waitâ€|where you in the house?" Chizuru's eyes searched his for any deceit.

"What? No. I arrived here only moments ago." Seeing the confusion in her eyes Saito's hand gripped the hilt of his katana.

"Someone is here. Or was at least. I heard you. I thoughtâ€|," her eyes started to scan the tree line again.

"There is no one out here. I would have seen them pass by." Chizuru nodded and briskly turned around and started running back towards the house with Saito following close behind.

"Yamazaki! Shimada!" Chizuru called out when they broke out from the tree line. 'Pleaseâ€|please be alright. Please be aliveâ€|' Chizuru's thoughts were beginning to turn dark. Whoever had been in the house walked right by all of them and escaped unnoticed by her and that was not something she liked.

As they neared the house she saw Yamazaki drop from the roof and Shimada turn the corner shortly after. Yamazaki's face instantly dawned confusion at the sight of not only Chizuru but Saito running out from the trees.

"Chizuruâ€|I thought you were inside?" He asked as they came together.

"I was. But someone was in the house. Or they were. I thought they had slipped by me and came outside. Did you see or hear anything?"

"No. I only heard your swords. Saito what are you doing here?" Shimada asked puzzled.

"I am here on Hijakta's orders. He was concerned you three would be ambushed," he replied calmly.

Yamazaki's brow furrowed lightly. "I never heard or saw anything. Are you sure someone was here?"

Chizuru nodded. "I'm sure of it. I can't tell who it was but someone was definitely here. And not too long ago." Everyone's eyes became clouded at the idea that someone had slipped right by them. "Come on. Let's get back inside and search. I don't believe I will be able to cook for you tonight gentlemen. I am sorry." Chizuru's voice was solemn as she started her way to the house.

An hour had passed proving to leave their efforts unfruitful. They had searched the house high and low yet nothing of use was found. All the letters Chizuru thought would be there were nowhere to be found. The thing that really troubled Chizuru was the candle.

'They were here. I know it. And they left the moment we arrived. How didn't we see them damn it?! And not a single clue left behind of them. Just this stupid candle!' Chizuru brain was starting to hurt and her temper was rising slowly. As she exited the house to join the others in the main yard she cursed in her head again. 'It's like this is a game for them.'

That thought made Chizuru freeze. "This is a game." Chizuru's voice brought the attention of the Shinsengumi men to her.

"What?" Yamazaki asked as he exchanged a look with Shimada. Saito's eyes took in Chizuru's shocked expression.

"This is a game. We don't know the players yet but this is a game to them." Chizuru's eyebrows furrowed in anger. "And they have the advantage."

"What do you mean Miss Yukimura?" Shimada asked as he stepped towards her.

"All the pieces are on the board. We can't see them but each piece is being moved into place. The only problem is they are dictating our movements." Chizuru's eyes locked with Saito's. "And I say it's about time we put an end to that."

Saito's face remained calm as he questioned her. "What do you have in mind then?"

"My village. It is not far from here. My old village. It has been uninhabited since its fall. I think we might be able to find something there."

"What do you think we will find?" Yamazaki asked.

"I'm not sure. But whatever it is, they were looking for it when they captured me."

"Captured?" Saito's eyebrows furrowed as Yamazaki and Shimada

exchanged glances.

"When they burned my village down and killed my parents, they kept me and my brotherâ€|although I don't know so much anymore about his side of the story. They kept asking for something. Where something was hidden. I didn't know what they were talking about at all. I didn't understand any of it at the time, but I'm thinking that whatever it is they wanted, may still be at my old village."

"You say they kept youâ€|Chizuruâ€|do you meanâ€|that theyâ€|tortured you?" Yamazaki's eyes were wide and Chizuru's small smile seemed more like a grimace.

"I suppose one could call it that. But that is a story for a different time. What do you say? If we stay here tonight, we can make it there before noon tomorrow. It's only a stone throw away." Everyone's eyes turned to Saito.

Saito pursed his lip for a fraction of a second before saying, "Hijikata will expect us back tomorrow evening. Will that offer you enough time?"

"I can only hope so." Chizuru replied. With that, everyone turned towards the house Chizuru once lived in to prepare for the morning.

"There is plenty of room for everyone. I will cook something quick so we can all get some sleep. I think it would be best for us to take shifts. Just in case whoever or whatever it was that was here before decides to return." Everyone nodded in agreement.

With little to no fuss, dinner was made and everyone settled in for the night. There were two rooms and it was decided that the males would sleep in one while Chizuru took the other. Their modesty almost made her smile. They never ceased to surprise her. Chizuru took the first shift and with that time decided to think.

'This place isn't home for me anymore. It feels more like a tomb now.' Chizuru glanced idly around the small living area in the center of the house. 'How much of all of this was a lie? Did Kono ever truly love me as his daughter? Or was he justâ€|using me?'

It made Chizuru's heart hurt to think that perhaps the small childhood she had experienced in these walls was a lie. Kono and Maseru were the only family she had known after her brother was presumed dead. She remembered laughing and running with her brother through the halls of their first homeâ€|when her parents were still alive.

She didn't remember much of her parents though. She could faintly remember their faces; that her father often smiled kindly and that he mother was beautiful. But the images were blurry and children do tend to exaggerate she supposed. A cold chill ran down Chizuru's arms and she crossed her arms in closer to her body. 'Tomorrowâ€|I'll be going back.' Chizuru's eyes fixed on the stars twinkling through the window in front of her. 'And what is it that I think I will find?' Time passed faster than she expected when Saito walked into the room.

"That time already?" she mused quietly.

"Yes. Try and get some rest. Morning will be here soon before you know it." Saito replied quietly.

"Yes I suppose it will." Chizuru's small smile faded just a bit as her gaze dropped to the floor. Slowly, she made her way to stand up.

"Chizuru?" His gaze caught her eyes and she stilled a moment before standing all the way up. "Will you be alright tomorrow?" The concern in his voice made her mind go blank. 'Is heâ€¢ worried about me?' her mind raced.

"Iâ€¢ I don't know. I haven't been back there since it all burned to the ground. I'mâ€¢ I'm not even sure what I'm looking for tomorrow or what we may find." Her hands grabbed her arms just a little bit tighter. "But something is telling me that we need to go there. That I need to go there." Her eyes met Saito's even stare and begged him to understand her.

"I will be there. I won't let anything happen to you." Saito's hushed voice was almost like a shout. It seemed to fit him; that just a few words would leave such an impact on her.

"Thank youâ€¢. Thank you so much Saito."

End
file.